

THE BATTLE OF MOLUKAI

by Lee Gaul & Sharon Monroe

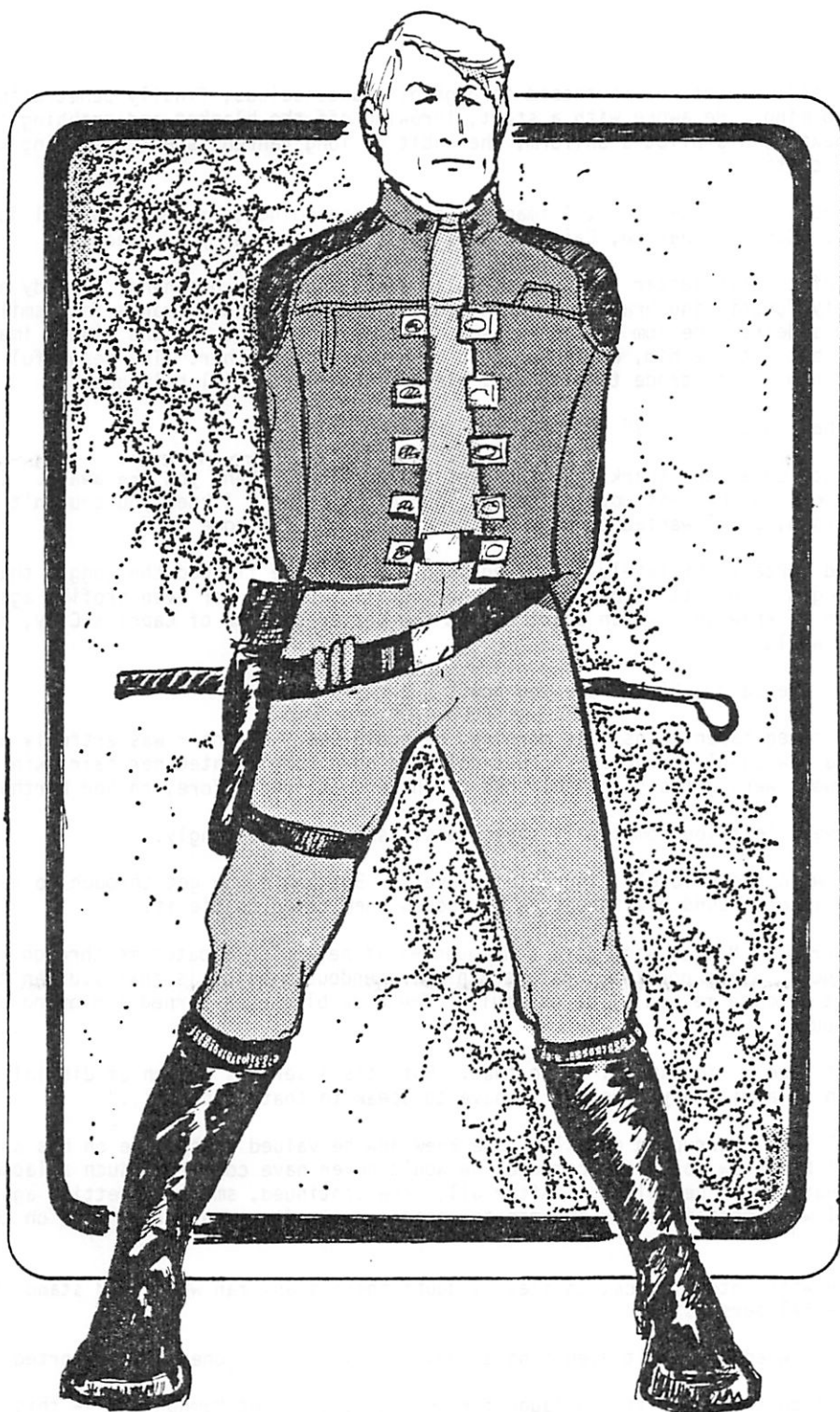
Frank V. Pitt
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-Mel. White

"Good morning, Cain," a soft voice teased through his subconscious, finally penetrating the Commander's sleep-dazed mind. He awoke with a start, throwing off the blanket and grabbing the holstered laser hanging next to his pilot's uniform, the habit of long yahrens spent answering klaxons and warnings at odd centars.

The voice giggled. "From the sound, I imagine you're responding to my wake-up call just like the Warrior you are. Can you hear me, Cain, or am I still just part of your dreams?"

Commander Cain of the battlestar PEGASUS was fully alert, laser in one hand, already half dressed. His instinctively-functioning brain placed the voice, and he saw the woman's face smiling out from the screen at his desk. The com device was set to receive, but not to send visual images, so the lady could hear but not see him, while he could both hear and see her. The beautiful blonde continued to smile at him as he strode to his desk, his uniform shirt still half open.

"Cassiopeia! What in blazes...?"

The generous mouth under the sparkling blue eyes smiled wider. "Ah, you *are* awake. I thought I'd give you a send-off on the last morning before your big mission. I knew you couldn't spare the time to see me in person, but I wanted to give you something to hurry home to."

Cain's frown had already completely dissolved into a smile. He flipped the toggle that would permit the device to begin transmitting his image to her, still studying her even profile against the background of a room he knew well -- an apartment in the better section of Caprica City, her home when she was on that world.

"There you are," she said. "I can see you now."

Cassiopeia had indeed taken pains this morning, he could see. Her hair was artfully piled on top of her head, with a few dangling curls. A rust-coloured gown complimented her fair skin. The jewelled adornments she wore were gifts he himself had given her not long before, on her birthday.

"Well, Cain, have I left you completely speechless?" she asked teasingly.

"Cassie, you know you look lovely, incredibly lovely. But how'd you get through to me here?" He wrapped a beige ascot around his throat as he spoke, then tried to tie it.

"I threatened Corporal Memnon with dire consequences if he wouldn't patch me through. I couldn't let you off without saying goodbye, whatever this tremendous mission is that you can't talk about. Can you at least promise me you'll be careful?" The wide blue eyes turned imploring as she pursed her lips in a pout.

Cain laughed out loud. "You know I'll do that. But it's a serious breach of discipline to patch a civilian through on a military line. I'll have to speak to that Corporal..."

"Don't do that," she interrupted quickly. She knew how he valued discipline on his ship. If the young man hadn't been new to Cain's command, he would never have committed such a lapse, but would have turned a deaf ear to her pleas. "After all," she continued, smiling prettily again, "you yourself once said I was impossible for any man to resist, just after you pulled rank on that Captain from Scoropia to..."

"You ought to be with Intelligence, Cassie. I doubt there's any man who could stand up very long against your special persuasion."

"Some good I'd be, when you won't even hint at how long you'll be gone," she retorted.

"You know I can't do that, but if you laugh for me again, I'll let Memnon off -- this time. But then I'll have to get to work. Say goodbye, Cassie?" He hated having to say farewell to her. She'd been special to him ever since the day he'd met her, not long after Jerusha, his wife, had died.

Cassiopeia responded with a gentle, low-pitched giggle, and a special gleam in her sapphire-blue

eyes. "I'll never forget you, you old war daggit," she said. "Hurry back." She smiled a moment longer, then bent her golden head as if to hide the sheen in her eyes; but he noticed. He saw her wave once; then her hand disappeared from view, and the screen's image froze as she cut the link. Cain felt an urge to call her back, to say something more, something he'd forgotten to tell her...

But that wouldn't be fair. She didn't want him to see her cry, didn't want his last memory to be of her dabbing at smudged eyes and smeared cheeks. He respected that.

Another voice broke through the com. "Surface-to-ship communication completed. Message cycled and coded five-five-one-two-point-seven-see, Commander's access only." Then Memnon was silent.

Cain mentally blessed the Communications Officer's intelligence, perception, and quick thinking, deciding the boy deserved a little leeway in disciplinary matters.

He had stepped to the mirror to comb his hair and finish tying his scarf, which had thus far resisted his best efforts, when the door annunciator chimed insistently. *Who in Sagan's name...?* He remembered -- he had a breakfast date with his daughter.

Lieutenant Sheba glanced quickly around the chamber before entering, and saw Commander Cain was awake and dressed. She herself was in a pilot's uniform, her long hair pulled mercilessly back into a strict military knot. She had her father's determined blue-grey eyes, but her gentler features were those of her mother, Jerusha. There was an eager smile on her lips.

Then her eyes found the screen, where the image of Cassiopeia still lingered. Her face seemed to harden, and her eyes became the cold grey steel of a battlestar as she turned accusingly to Cain. "You've been talking to *her*," she said challengingly, daring her father to deny it.

"Cassie called to say goodbye. Surely you don't begrudge your father that," he responded patiently.

Whatever pleasant conversation Sheba had intended to begin was completely forgotten. She stared helplessly and balefully at the screen. How could her father, the great Commander Cain, possibly be interested in a...a common *socialator*? How could he do that to her mother's memory? When her father was thinking of *that woman*, he didn't seem to have time for his only child. *Damn her!*

"What's on your mind, Sheba?" From the expression on her face, he knew quite well what his daughter was thinking; they'd argued about it before. But maybe talking about Cassiopeia would help ease the situation...

"Just a few memories," she replied stiffly, then tried to soften her voice before continuing. "I remember the time we toured the ship, just before I started at the Academy, and we all ate breakfast together in the Pilots' Mess. I think some of them were jealous of you, when they saw how lovely Mother was..."

"Sheba!" Cain's voice was low, sharp, and slightly pained. "I realize you miss your mother; I miss her, too. But there comes a time when you have to let go of the past and work toward the future. And I believe that time has come. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she shot back, her lips trembling slightly as she tried to hold back the unwelcome, unWarrior-like tears. How could her father do this? And for *her*? "You think so *highly* of Mother's memory that you couldn't wait to start chasing some little tramp..."

"Lieutenant!" Now, there was only ice in his voice, in his clipped, angry tones. "That will be all. Dismissed."

She stared in shock. Dressing her down like a green cadet? After a moment, she realized what had happened, that she'd let her temper get in the way of her true feelings for her father, said things she shouldn't have let slip, and been banished from his presence. It was all Cassiopeia's fault! Then, with exaggerated formality, she saluted, snapped out a crisp, "Yes, sir!" and turned to the door, marching stiffly from the room without looking back.

Cain watched her go. He was tempted to call her back, tell her he loved her and understood what she was feeling, hug her like the little girl she'd always been to him; but his own anger and pride were aroused. He was the Commander of this ship, and no Lieutenant was going to speak to him in that insulting manner, or denigrate the woman he... The woman he *what*?

Did he love Cassiopeia? She had come into his life at just the right time, and done just the right things. She'd helped him through the pain of his wife's passing, when it was still a raw, deep, open wound that left his heart choked with emptiness. She'd never tried to tie him down, never sunk claws into him as if he were some sort of property, never tried to drag him into her world like some

prize to display, never claimed more than he could give her at any time. Cassie wasn't much older than his daughter, but she had a hard-won wisdom and maturity he at times doubted Sheba would ever have.

Sweet little Sheba. With him gone so much of the time, perhaps the child had depended too much on her mother. With her father practically a Colonial legend, it had to be difficult for a young girl to find friends, to recognize and trust those who liked her for herself. And she and her mother had shared such pride in Cain -- just as they'd shared such a strong resemblance.

Sheba was a Warrior -- young, mostly untried, but still a Warrior. Now, she was at his side, grown through the pain of being alone after Jerusha's death, forcing him to remember the dead wife she so closely resembled. She was jealous of anything that might possibly come between her father and herself, and her pride in him. So fearful was she of her father's love affair, she'd failed to seek any other personal life of her own. She wanted only to be near Cain, and to remove Cassiopeia from any part in his life. She failed to see that she could never take her mother's place -- or Cassie's -- no matter how hard she tried.

Cain sighed. He loved them both -- two young women, so near in age, both beautiful and precious to him, but for different reasons. He wanted them both to have a part in his life...

Cassiopeia would gladly accept Sheba, if only his daughter could be convinced to accept the other woman at her father's side. It wouldn't be easy, but...

He knew he had to make a decision about Cassiopeia, to either give their relationship a permanent significance or release her from any ties to him. When this mission was over, he would have that decision, and would stand by it. He knew what Sheba wanted; he also thought he knew what Cassie would accept. She loved him; both women did. Perhaps Sheba would have to learn to accept that not-so-insignificant fact.

His stomach growled, reminding him that time was passing; it was time for a meal. Soon, the PEGASUS would be under way, along with the OLYMPUS and the BRITANNICA -- her sister ships -- and the numerous support craft that made up the Fifth Fleet, on the secret, urgent mission assigned them by High Command.

He grabbed his flight jacket and headed for the Officers' Mess. He should stop on the Bridge first, check with Kleopatra on mission status...

The mission. Molukai was a crossroads planet, approximately midway between the Colonial Alliance and the Delphian Empire, the centre of a trade network spanning several quadrants. A single planet with one natural satellite, circling an old red star, Molukai had been inhabited by a succession of space-faring non-native sentient species for over fifty millennia, and was constantly in a state of political flux as various peoples fought for control, or manipulated for the most profitable positions or businesses. At present, Cain had been told at the briefing, there were at least two dozen species represented among the population, including both Colonials and Delphians.

Molukai tried to maintain neutrality in the Colonial-Cylon War, struggling to retain its independence from the growing, militaristic Delphian Empire at the same time. It was in the Colonies' best interests to see the planet free and independent. While she at times harboured fugitives from justice, she also provided a safe haven for refugees, and a free Molukai kept important trade routes open for several species other than the humans.

Until now, the Cylon Empire had more or less respected that neutrality, since Molukai posed no threat to them; even Cylon agents worked through it at times. Now, however, word had somehow been smuggled to High Command through supposedly "absolutely reliable" Intelligence agents that a Cylon fleet was slowly tightening a noose around that system, threatening its autonomy.

To prevent a Cylon take-over, the Fifth Fleet was ordered to "visit" Molukai on a "goodwill" mission. They were to break the siege, if necessary, or drive the Cylons out if they were already on the planet. If the report proved false, they were simply -- though quite diplomatically and most dramatically -- a reminder to the Cylon Imperious Leader that the Colonies would not stand by and permit the mechanical empire to overrun a "friendly power."

Cain frowned as he strode down the corridors of his ship, drawing concerned glances from passing crew members, who quickly stopped and stood to attention as he went by. He returned their salutes automatically, deep in thought. Intelligence had never been his favourite branch of the Service. Despite their small numbers and almost complete secrecy, he felt they got too much leeway from High Command, and too much media attention for their few publicized activities. He could never quite bring himself to trust men and women who made their living by deceit, rather than straightforward battle -- even if such people were occasionally necessary to the military. They had too many

secrets.

Molukai had never asked for outside help before, he reminded himself. In fact, they shunned it whenever possible, and several times had ignored Colonial offers of alliance or treaty. Of course, they were more likely to turn to the Colonies than to the Delphian Empire if they truly feared for their autonomy; the Delphians had long desired to annex the system. And a free, independent Molukai at least permitted what little interaction there was between the Colonies and their Empire. The two nations had skirmished over minor differences in the past, before the Cylon War had heated up to its present fury, but political scientists still cheerfully predicted the Delphians would eventually join the human alliance of their own free will.

If that were eventually to happen, the Warrior in Cain secretly wished the Delphians would take over Molukai. It would make one less border to defend against the Cylons, would give them one more friend among the stars. On the other hand, if this crisis lasted any length of time, Molukai might quietly accept human domination as an alternative to Cylon tyranny.

Cain smiled, suddenly realizing he'd stopped in the middle of an empty corridor, and resumed his stride toward breakfast. Molukai would have to wait a while...

* * * * *

Damn, damn, damn! How could I have done such a stupid thing? Sheba stared morosely at the deck as she stepped out of the turbolift. She'd let her emotions speak before thinking, mentioning her mother like that, talking about her. How could I have been so lacking in subtlety? It wasn't tactically correct. Why didn't I get Father to breakfast first, then bring up Mother slowly, carefully, reminiscingly? Maybe he'd have told some stories about the early days of their courtship and sealing -- when an irrepressible Warrior had swept a young Caprican woman off her feet, and made her the toast of society in a whirlwind courtship by the Hero of Cimtar. Maybe he'd have remembered all the promises he made me when I was a little girl. Maybe we'd have been able to share hopes for the future, talk about plans -- if, nothing else, discuss the immediate mission...

Now that Cassiopeia was there, Sheba saw much less of her father, unless they were working. And today, she didn't have even that little time with him. She'd lost her temper; Cain had responded in kind. And the socialator had won another victory.

Why? What does Father see in Cassiopeia? Why can't he turn to me, his daughter, if he needs to talk or wants someone to share his time with? After all, what does that woman know about us, about our lives, our hopes, our dreams? A cheap -- no, not cheap, expensive; those "trinkets" on her last birthday! -- whore, a socialator, for Sagan's sake! How can such a woman take Mother's place...?

Sheba hated Cassiopeia for many reasons, some of them simple, like not wanting to see another woman in her mother's place; some more complicated, from the complex web of emotions in a father-daughter, Commander-Lieutenant relationship. As a Warrior, she saw her contest with Cassiopeia as a military engagement, with the prize being Cain's undivided attention.

There were some things she couldn't give her father; she knew that, but she was his daughter -- she ought to have some say in his life. She shared his chosen profession; she was at his side more than Cassiopeia could ever be; she knew the risks as the other woman never could. She and her father could share duty, and flying, and fighting...

It never occurred to her that there might be times when Cain didn't want to talk about fighting, didn't need to be reminded of war, when he needed a gentler hand to ease the pains and fears even a "living legend" couldn't avoid. He was still only a man, whose emotions and needs Cassiopeia understood, unencumbered by the burden of living up to unwritten expectations. Sheba insisted her father be the Warrior, the hero, so she could be the loyal daughter and follow him with pride; Cassiopeia accepted him as a man, and was content to be a woman for him.

Sheba crossed the deck with aimless steps. She'd lost her appetite, so she simply wandered about, hating Cassiopeia, and blaming herself. Instinct carried her to her Viper, her only real home. Without her mother there, the house on Caprica was only a shell, and Lieutenants didn't rate fancy quarters on a warship, even if their father was the Commander.

A shadowy figure watched her walk by, then vanished along the row of fighters, confident the woman hadn't observed its furtive actions.

There was her Viper, one of a long row of sleek fighting machines, gleaming silver with red striping. She trailed her hand along the red band on one of the delta wings, still lost in thought.

The two men who approached Sheba and the line of ships watched without disturbing her for several

long moments.

Lieutenant Garnyd was her wingman. The tall, spare Warrior had graduated from the Caprican Academy with Sheba, although he was at least six or seven yahrens older than she was, and they'd flown together throughout the two yahrens they'd been aboard the PEGASUS. Garnyd understood people very well, and from his friendship with Sheba, he knew that only a problem with her father could put that combination of wistful "lostness" and impotent anger on her face. The most likely cause had to be the woman Commander Cain was seeing...

Zumbro was a stockily-built man, not much taller than Sheba, but with fifteen extra yahrens. One of the Viper maintenance technicians for Silver Spar Squadron, and an old hand aboard the PEGASUS, he saw a lot of Sheba, and talked with her frequently. Involved as she was trying to be in her father's life, she never realized that he had fallen deeply in love with her, didn't notice the extra care he lavished on her ship, would have been startled to hear him speak of his feelings for her. Zumbro wouldn't tell her he loved her; he strongly suspected Sheba would never love anyone but a Warrior, and preferably one as heroic as possible, someone her father would be proud to have in the family. No, he wouldn't tell her; she would never know.

The Warrior and the mechanic exchanged worried glances. Then Zumbro nodded and went on to his assigned task of checking out Garnyd's ship. The Lieutenant, almost paranoid in his concern for his Viper, trusted only Zumbro for maintenance work.

Garnyd approached Sheba, hoping a little talk would put a smile back on her now-unhappy features. He tapped her on the shoulder.

She looked up, startled, but managed a fleeting smile. "Oh, hi, Garnyd. Did you say something?"

Something must really be bothering her, he thought. She prided herself on her quick alertness. "No," he said aloud. "But you look like you've got something on your mind."

She shrugged in response, considered denying it, then turned away from him to study her Viper.

"Weren't you supposed to have breakfast with the Commander today?" he asked, remembering her pleased animation the evening before. He crossed his arms and leaned against the delta fin.

She glanced murderously back at him, lips twitching slightly before tightening to a thin line. "We were *supposed* to," she said, then forced her chin to lift proudly. "Something came up." Her insistence was defiant, if a bit lame.

"I thought socialators weren't allowed on board the night before a mission." Garnyd's tone was light, but he watched her narrowly as he went straight to the heart of the problem in an effort to shock her into talking. "Or any civilian, for that matter," he continued when she shot another angry glare at him, her eyes sparkling with rage.

"No! She called *him*, and some *idiot* put her through. At least she couldn't come aboard. I just couldn't stand knowing *that*..." she finished, her voice seething as she tried to control herself. If she didn't scream, Sheba was afraid she might burst into tears -- and she was determined not to do *that*.

A nearby outburst of laughter startled them both, and they jumped guiltily, staring across the flight deck.

The PEGASUS, leaving night simulation, was rapidly coming awake. People were criss-crossing the previously empty deck; pilots and techs were checking ships; maintenance personnel and miscellaneous crew members were pursuing private errands. Three people detached themselves from the flowing stream of traffic and strolled toward the two pilots.

Technician Vandel, unlike Zumbro, had a sort of rakish charm that drew women to him. Just now, he was accompanied by two pretty young pilots. One was from Silver Spar; the other, recently assigned to Bronze Wing, was a stranger to both Sheba and Garnyd.

"Hey, Zumbro!" Vandel called jovially. "Did you know Livia here's from your home town? I didn't think there were that many of you in the whole Fleet from that old moon!"

The other tech popped out from under the launch track to stare briefly in pleased surprise before answering with a greeting of his own. Most of the inhabitants of Elys Moon Base were independent traders; few entered the Service, and those few were unlikely to serve on the flagship of Sagittara.

Garnyd and Sheba moved out of hearing range. While Cain took pains to treat his daughter as much

like any other Warrior as possible, she was always proud to be his "baby," and would never willingly let anyone know if there was a strain in their relationship. But Garnyd always knew if something was troubling her, and she knew she could trust her wingmate.

"You can't run your father's life, you know," the tall man said quietly as they walked.

"I'm not trying to run his life!" she whispered back. "I just can't stand the thought of him spending his time with a *socialator*!"

"Even if he loves her?" Garnyd asked quietly.

"Love? *Cassiopeia*? Impossible! Everybody *knows* a socialator's 'love' lasts only as long as a man's money!" she responded spitefully. "Men don't really love them, or marry them."

Her companion was silent for a moment. Sheba had made up her mind about Cassiopeia, without giving the other woman a chance. Maybe she was afraid of her, but he'd met the socialator, and she was really a nice person. Somehow, though, Sheba seemed determined to be the only woman left in Cain's life...

"I doubt you'll change your father's mind by sulking," Garnyd commented at last.

"I know that," she replied quickly, but he had the feeling that sulking was exactly what she planned to do if necessary.

"Hey, Garnyd!" someone yelled.

They glanced back. Vandel was waving some sort of device in the air. Zumbro peered out from under the nose of Garnyd's Viper; the two female pilots stood behind Vandel.

"Zumbro wants to know what this thing is that you wired into your main tylium feed C-circuit. Power increase or some such? You been holding out on us, Lieutenant?"

Garnyd stared for a moment, his mouth open, frowning in confusion at the unusual, unfamiliar device. Then it made sense, and his eyes widened in outright horror.

"Merciful Lords!" he breathed, then ran back toward his fighter, screaming, "Drop it! Get away from there! *Now!*" He prayed he was in time.

* * * * *

"Very good of you to give us a personal send-off," Cain said politely, nodding slightly in Count Baltar's direction, somehow including the other man's enigmatic aide Karibdis without actually acknowledging him. He didn't have much patience for bureaucrats, especially the Council's lackeys. To have to endure their presence when he would rather be on the Bridge preparing for departure or checking out sections of his ship was difficult indeed. He found Baltar a particularly troublesome nuisance. The Picon showed up far too often for his liking and had become, to Cain's thinking, a real pain in the posterior.

"You've been most generous with your time, Commander, and I do appreciate how busy you must be," the politically-minded trader replied with equal politeness. The smile on his lips reached nowhere near his eyes. His aide muttered some equally meaningless platitude and retreated into his usual somber silence.

Cain's feelings about Baltar were reciprocated; the civilian was as eager to leave as the Warrior was to have him gone. Both had other matters on their minds; both had spent the previous centar fidgeting in the other's company. But at last, the required socially and militarily correct time was up.

"Your shuttle is ready for departure, unless there's something else..." Cain queried, clearly hoping the Count would leave immediately. The Picon's personal shuttle, marked with some peculiarly obscure family crest, was refueled and prepared, waiting on the deck of the huge landing bay, her pilot and co-pilot patiently standing by. She was a decidedly non-military vehicle, easily recognizable -- either in space or on the ground.

"I've taken up quite enough of your time," Baltar replied hastily, with a quick glance at his aide. Obviously, they were both glad to be on their way. Cain waited politely but impatiently as the two men boarded their small ship.

Baltar turned to Karibdis as soon as the hatch clanged shut behind them. The decorative frosted

glass door to the pilots' cubicle was also closed, giving them complete privacy.

"Did you do it?" the Count demanded in a hushed voice, nearly shaking in anticipation.

Karibdis smiled, a dark, forbidding expression that didn't belong on his blandly handsome face. "Done. The first time our friendly Intelligence officer launches, he'll redecorate his launch tube. Such a *terrible* accident..."

Baltar shuddered slightly at his aide's obvious relish for a young man's sudden death, but his reaction didn't last long. The Intelligence "plant" aboard the PEGASUS had been a thorn in his side in the past, and he was glad to know the man would soon be dead. Even though the battlestar -- and Cain -- would never return from this mission, it gave him great pleasure to know the other man's death would be a more personal victory.

"I trust this will prove to our friends that we are trustworthy allies," Karibdis commented.

"Yesss," Baltar hissed slowly, greed betrayed in his narrow eyes. "The Fifth Fleet, our first installment in exchange for control of Picon when the war is over. Soon, very soon..."

Karibdis smiled enigmatically, somehow seeming more evil than the man he served. He would continue to serve Cylon interests under the Count for the present, but afterward, who knew? He might claim a Colony of his own to rule, or perhaps Baltar would not survive to claim Picon after all...

* * * * *

Commander Cain watched as Baltar's shuttle launched, relieved to see his unwelcome guests go; at last, he could return to his proper duties, which were infinitely more interesting and satisfying. As the small craft vanished into the first Caprican sunrise, he turned briskly away. As long as he was in the bay, he would pull a flash inspection of Viper squadron preparedness.

There were large numbers of pilots and technicians scurrying over the flight deck, engaged in their own activities. In fact, he saw Sheba there, talking to her wingman. Perhaps he should speak with her for a moment; he'd been brusque this morning, more so than he'd intended, and his conscience disturbed him. She was, after all, his daughter, and Jerusha's...

Somebody called to one of them; they both looked back at Garnyd's ship, where a cluster of techs and pilots had gathered. Garnyd yelled something in return, and started running toward the group; Sheba followed him. His shout drew the attention of others; several people watched curiously.

Garnyd stopped abruptly, whirled, and threw himself at Sheba, who was still a few paces behind him.

Cain started forward, intending to find out what was wrong; a Commander's presence might be of some assistance...

Hades flared in the bay.

A searing ball of intense white light suddenly engulfed the Viper and the people around it; thunder echoed through the bay. The noise reverberated across the deck, and sudden screams tore at Cain's ears. The brilliance of the explosive flare blinded him for a long moment. The screams continued, a background only dimly perceived through the roar of tylium-fed explosions.

When Cain could see again, he stared at the burning section of deck. Garnyd's Viper no longer existed; Vipers on either side of where it had stood burned brightly. Fear stopped his heart for a micron; for a desperate moment, he couldn't breathe, much less call out in his anguish. He took a step, his eyes searching wildly.

"Sheba!"

Then he saw her, under Garnyd's inert form, beyond the fire's reach. The Commander forgot all decorum and ran for a mere Lieutenant's side -- a father concerned for his child. *Merciful Lords, if she's dead...* He'd never forgive himself that their last words had been harsh.

"Sheba!" he called again, his voice a groan. He reached his baby's side and stared at her closed eyes and pale face, all he could see under Garnyd's larger, bloody body.

Somebody had grabbed a boroton mist container and was working on the small fires, smothering them before the Viper fuel tanks could explode. Somebody else sounded an alarm; lights and sirens flashed everywhere, adding to the confusion. It would be several centons, though, before a medical team could reach the bay. Personnel gathered around the fire and the Commander, maintaining a re-

spectful distance, watching in shocked silence, unsure what to do.

Cain didn't dare touch either of them; he didn't know how badly they might be hurt. Let the medics see to them first. If Sheba was dead... He glanced about, forcing conscious thought back into his stunned mind.

There had been three -- no, four -- people standing by the Viper. Those burnt lumps, smelling of overcooked meat... His stomach rose into his throat, but he forced it down again. He was a Warrior, after all.

He recognized one of the men who stood nearby, watching awkwardly. "Foster! Get those people back, and set up a Security line until Major Daniel can look at this. And cover those bodies, if you can find something..."

The young Security Sergeant heard him over the shrieking of a warning siren; he broke his frozen stance, pushed several people back, then disappeared into the crowd.

"What...what happened? Gar...nyd, where...?" Cain caught his breath at Sheba's confused words. She was conscious, wide-eyed, rubbing the back of her head. She pushed at her wingmate's body uncomprehendingly, then stared at her father again, dazed, but alive.

She was alive! Thank the Lords, she was *alive*!

"Oh, baby!" Garnyd rolled aside as Cain caught his daughter in his arms, hugging her close, shaking a little. Her hair fell loose over his arms; it had never looked so good to him.

"Garnyd!" She saw the blood on the unconscious man's uniform, the metal-slashed rips that dribbled small red pools of life onto the deck, and realized he wasn't moving. She stared back at her father with tragic eyes. "He...shielded me. He must have...or I'd be... Father, what happened?"

"I don't know, baby, I don't know. Just rest; don't move. The doctors'll be here in microns..."

"Zumbro! And the others!" She stared helplessly past her father at the scattered wreckage and the human carnage, and her pale face turned a sickly shade of green. But, like her father, she was made of stern stuff, and she controlled her stomach. Several others had less control, and ran.

Foster reappeared, his arms full of some tarp-like material; the med team was with him. Someone helped the Security man cover the charred bodies and move the still-gathering crowd back. Major Daniel, head of Security, arrived to take charge of examining the explosion scene. Dr. Helena, Chief Medical Officer, knelt to check Garnyd. Several med techs and emergency personnel hovered nearby.

"I'll take a look at them," Helena's assistant offered, gesturing toward the corpses.

"Can you handle it?" the statuesque medic asked quietly. The man had only recently been assigned to the PEGASUS, and she couldn't remember his background.

"I was at Sarasson." With that simple explanation, the skilled healer took up the grisly role of coroner. After a brief hesitation, one of the med techs slowly knelt to assist him.

Helena rose after a moment, and two of her med techs carefully shifted the injured Garnyd onto a stretcher. The doctor extended a hand to Sheba.

"I'm all right," the Lieutenant said, still staring at her wingman. "How's Garnyd?"

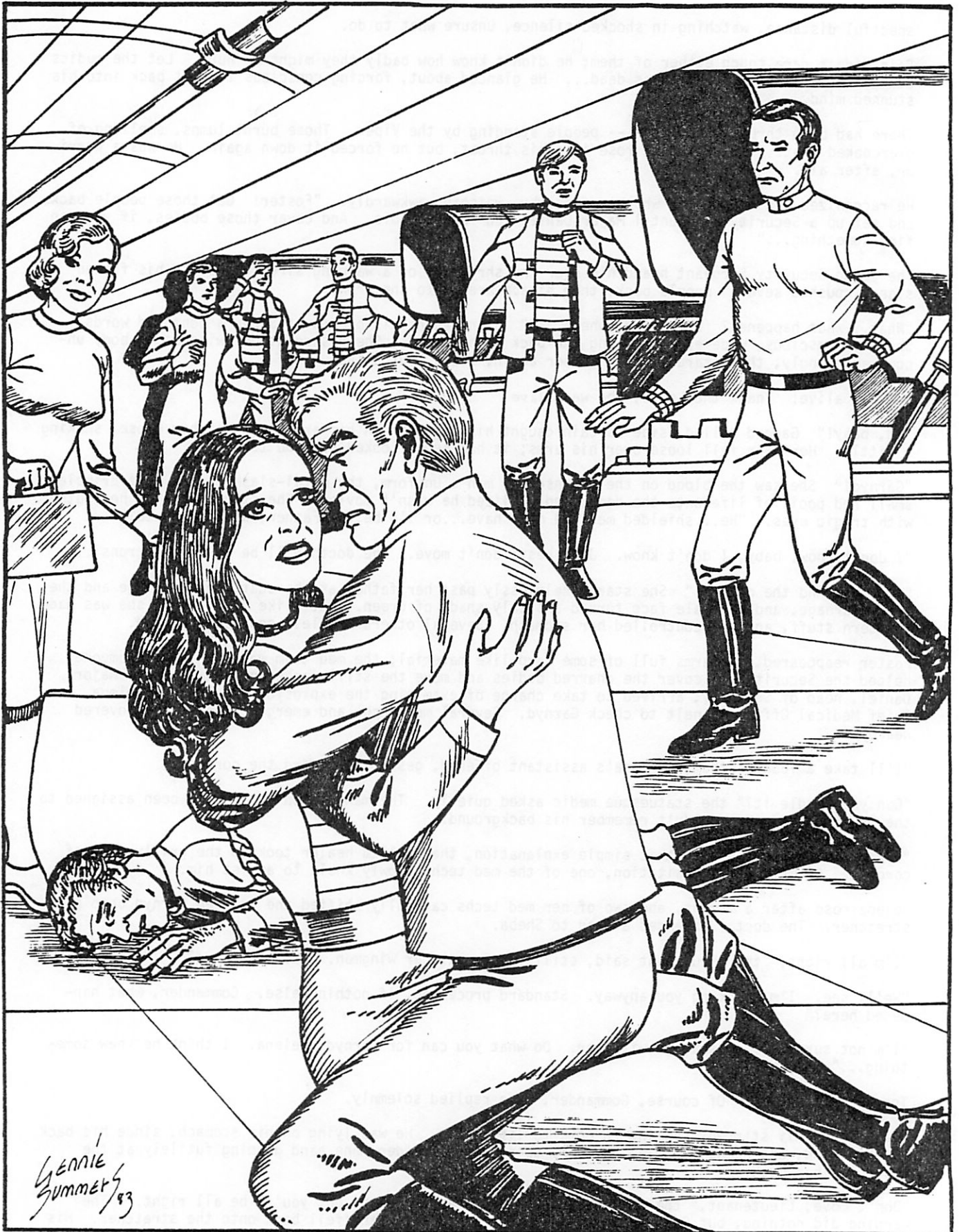
"We'll see. I'm checking you anyway. Standard procedure, if nothing else. Commander, what happened here?"

"I'm not sure yet. Sheba, go with her. Do what you can for Garnyd, Helena. I think he knew something..."

The doctor nodded. "Of course, Commander," she replied solemnly.

Garnyd suddenly stirred, seeming to come to life again. He was lying on his stomach, since his back was bleeding, and he half-rolled to stare up at his Commander, one hand groping futilely at the wounds on his back.

"Don't move, Lieutenant," the doctor warned. "You've been hurt, but you'll be all right." The warning did nothing, but Garnyd lacked the strength to move, and fell back onto the stretcher. His



Gennie
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eyes, still fixed on Cain, were unfocussing, as if he were going into shock. His mouth moved soundlessly for a moment before he could slur out any words.

The doctor reached into her kit; her hand came out with an injector.

"No...not yet... Commander..." Garnyd managed to whisper, reaching feebly for Cain's hand. "Sabotage... Check for...tylium...ty..." His hand dropped, and his voice faltered into silence.

"Get him to Life Centre immediately!" the doctor snapped, stabbing the point of her injector into his arm. "Sheba, too. And those..." -- she gestured vaguely in the direction of the dying fire -- "we can ship them home from here. Now, *move!*"

What was Garnyd trying to tell him? Cain watched silently as the medical team disappeared with the injured, and the makeshift medical examiner began removing the dead. He strode over to the burnt Vipers, crunching shrapnel underfoot.

"Well?" he demanded, approaching a man who knelt in the midst of the wreckage. Everything stank of tylium.

"Checking," the stern-voiced Major Daniel replied. "Get some of Velede's Damage Control people up here -- and, Commander, count on at least one day's delay from this. We'll need to make repairs after I finish my investigation, and I imagine you'll want to replace the pilots and techs, both dead and injured; I assume we'll have the time, and you'll want a full crew. I'll give you my report as soon as I have anything on this." The brown-haired man turned back to his work, curt as always. Several shards of metal disappeared into small pouches.

"Lieutenant Garnyd suggested sabotage."

The Major glanced back at him, "I'll look into it."

Cain nodded. Daniel was efficient, and a loyal officer as well as a good friend. The Commander would know whatever there was to know as soon as the Chief of Security knew it himself. He strode rapidly toward the nearest turbolift.

"Commander?"

"Yes, Foster?" he answered, halting momentarily.

"Where can we reach you, sir, if it's necessary?"

"For now, in my quarters; I have to report this to Colonial High Command. Later, I'll be in Life Centre. I want to see my daughter, and the rest of the injured. But I want to see Major Daniel as soon as he has any information for me."

"Yes, sir." Foster stepped back respectfully.

Cain disappeared into the turbolift.



The battlestar GALACTICA had returned from a long patrol of the Colonial defence perimeter only a section before. When High Command advised of the problem aboard the PEGASUS, Adama -- her Commander, and a member of the Council of the Twelve -- was quite willing to lend a hand. It had been a long tour, his ship needed general maintenance, and his crew was tired; but he promised to ask for a few volunteers to fill the vacant fighter pilot posts. Cain could have waited another section and had his pick of the graduates from the Caprican Military Academy -- or from any other Academy in the Colonies, for that matter -- but High Command wanted the Fifth Fleet under way immediately. Once he learned what the mission was, Adama understood why Cain wanted only experienced personnel for something so potentially explosive, both diplomatically and militarily. The opportunity to serve under Cain, the "living legend," was certain to convince at least a few of his crew that they weren't too exhausted for another brief tour of duty.

Only centars later, Adama studied the list of volunteers Colonel Tigh had brought to his quarters. There were approximately two dozen names on it, drawn from all squadrons. If half the crew hadn't already left on furlough, the list would have been longer. The Commander wasn't sure whether to be pleased by how readily the GALACTICA's personnel responded to need, or offended that so many were eager to leave his command. But Cain had a reputation and a flair many found hard to resist. Adama remembered how it had been when they were both young pilots together, many yahrens before...

He examined the list again.

Something surprised him. After all the hero-worship lavished on Cain, after the collected holos and newscrystals, after the yahrens of asking over and over again for the same stories of when Adama and Cain had flown together as a team, his son's name wasn't on the list. He'd almost expected to see Apollo's name heading the roster.

The idealistic, wide-eyed Cadet had become a fine Warrior, with a growing reputation of his own that might one day over-shadow his father's. In fact, after this last tour, Adama had put in for a commendation for his son. Apollo deserved a promotion, and some official notice for his performance. The Commander sometimes had the uneasy feeling that he went too far in trying to be impartial toward his Warriors, and failed to give his son the recognition he deserved. But there would always be jealous eyes watching, envious men prepared to point an accusing finger and scream, "Nepotism!" the micron a commander so much as smiled at his -- or her -- own offspring on the same vessel. It wasn't proper to give a son preferential treatment, but it wasn't fair to ignore him completely, either, especially when the offspring was a Warrior such as Apollo had become...

A chime at the door announced the arrival of that same Lieutenant Apollo, who smiled when he saw what his father was doing. "I wondered how long it would take to get your list," he laughed.

Adama smiled back. "And I'm still wondering why *your* name isn't on it. Loyalty to your old Commander, or what? After yahrens of hearing how great Cain is, I can't believe you wouldn't jump at a chance to serve under him."

Apollo sobered quickly, and seemed just a bit uncomfortable. He shrugged half-heartedly.

Adama's bushy, silver-streaked eyebrows lifted in query. "You really *do* want to go with him, don't you?"

"I don't know," his son replied slowly. "I always thought I wanted to serve with him, and be like him, when I was young." Adama smiled, wondering what Apollo would say when he truly *was* no longer young. "But I feel...reluctant...about going with him now, as if it's not the right time, as if there's something...wrong...about this mission... That doesn't make sense, does it?"

"Maybe I *should* send you with him. The experience might be good for you, serving under another Commander..."

"I got enough of other Commanders at the Academy," Apollo retorted. "I've done well here, with you, haven't I, Father?"

"It wouldn't necessarily be a permanent transfer, Apollo -- just for this one mission," Adama reminded him.

"Whatever this mission is. You haven't even said how long it'll be, or where the Fifth Fleet is going."

"And I still can't tell you. But if you want to go, you know you have my blessing. I won't consider it a betrayal if you want to join Cain's command for a time." Adama saw Apollo's eyes light up briefly, and despite what he'd just said, he felt a little disappointed.

Then Apollo took a deep breath and shook his head in determination. "No, I think I'll stay. I can't fly without Starbuck and Boomer, and they've already left on furlough. What would they think if I went without them? Besides, we promised Mother and Zac we'd all be home for his birthday party. Can't let my little brother down, now, can I? He's only got another yahren left at the Academy. After that, you never know..."

Adama understood. It wasn't just a question of where Zaccariah, his younger son, might be assigned; it was the risks a Warrior had to take in the course of his duty. A close friend of Apollo's, a girl he'd liked a lot -- although it hadn't been love, not yet -- hadn't come back from this last mission. For now, the family was whole. But in another yahren, who knew? Even this mission with the PEGASUS held so much potential for trouble, although it was touted as a goodwill mission by High Command. Who knew how long Apollo might be gone if he left with Cain -- or even if he'd ever return? Adama was glad to keep his son at his side...

"All right," he said briskly. "To be honest, I don't mind keeping you aboard." He touched a switch to open a com line to the Bridge. "Tigh, I've made my choices."

"Well, Commander, which unfortunates have just lost their furloughs?" The Bridge must be nearly empty for Colonel Tigh to speak to his Commander so flippantly.

Adama picked up the volunteer roster. "Lieutenants Bojay, Paris, and Celeste -- I think she's got a sister on the PEGASUS. I understand Cain pulled his replacement Viper techs from Number Two Dry Dock on Rhada."

"Yes, he has," Tigh responded. "With his reputation, he can pull people from just about anywhere. Shall I inform him of the personnel we're sending?"

Apollo looked surprised at the disgruntlement he heard in Tigh's voice; Adama waved him to silence before answering. "Let him know, Colonel. And tell the pilots to start gathering their gear immediately."

"Right away, sir."

Apollo's gaze betrayed his curiosity, but Adama forestalled any inquiry. "It's a personal matter between them, and I'd respect the private nature of it, if you want to keep Tigh's friendship."

Apollo had known Colonel Tigh from his own childhood, liked the man, and valued his friendship. He asked no questions.

* * * * *

As was expected of a Commander, Cain stood by, watching as personnel from the base's medical centre finished loading an emergency shuttle for the brief flight to Caprica City. The remains of the dead crew members were encased in opaque crystal tubes, ready to be shipped back to their home planets, to their families, for interment. Garnyd, Sheba, and a tech who'd been injured in the explosion were also going to the surface. While the PEGASUS was quite capable and, indeed, extremely competent at tending her own wounded, Cain saw no reason to take already injured personnel into a possible combat zone. What he hated most was having to leave Sheba behind. He was going to miss having his daughter around...

The Life Centre team approached. Garnyd and the other man were on stretchers; Sheba was walking, her sprained wrist in a simple sling, a bandage on her injured shoulder. Only one fragment of metal had penetrated Garnyd's living shield, but the woman had fallen badly, unexpectedly, hitting her head even as she injured her arm.

Garnyd was still unconscious, although in Doctor Helena's opinion, he would recover with no lasting physical impairments. The Commander's daughter held his hand as she walked beside him.

Sheba stopped at the hatchway; med techs pushed one stretcher up the ramp. "Take care, Garnyd," she whispered, leaning close to his ear and squeezing his hand tightly as the men returned for him. She couldn't be sure, but she thought she felt an instinctive answering pressure from his fingers. She was going to miss him; he was one of the few people she could be truly open with. He was *her* friend

-- with no eye to her father's reputation.

"Sheba?" Cain asked quizzically when she moved back, making no attempt to board the shuttle.

She glanced at her father, then back at the shuttle, already beginning pre-flight checks.

"She's not badly hurt, Commander -- a little scraped, a sprained arm, a few cuts and bruises, but that's about all. In my medical opinion, she'll be all right in a few days, combat-ready a day or two after that, so I'm permitting her to stay aboard." The Chief Medical Officer's china-doll expression rarely changed, whatever the situation, and this was no exception. With only a faint professional smile and a nod at the two of them, Helena turned back to her station.

There was no one else present for the moment; Cain put his arms around Sheba and hugged her. "I'm glad, baby. I want you here," he said quietly, then released her and hurried off to greet an arriving shuttle, one bringing the pilots from the GALACTICA.

Sheba perked up in pleased surprise, her eyes bright, her mouth smiling, her heart singing again. *He wants me with him! He's glad I'm staying!* It was a good sign, and it made her very happy. She straightened her shoulders and tagged close behind her father, controlling a grimace of pain as her injured shoulder protested the movement.

The GALACTICA shuttle, marked with a device of interlocking triangles, had been cleared to land before the ground-based medical shuttle could take off. It settled to a complete stop, and Cain hastened to meet his new pilots as the med ship blasted out of the bay. The technicians from Rhada Dry Dock were already on board.

He saw several people in pilots' uniforms disembark, duffles in hand or slung over shoulders. The last person, however, didn't leave the darkness of the shuttle's hatchway. Cain caught a glimpse of a dark-skinned man in blue, then the figure retreated out of his sight. He frowned as he continued walking, but made no effort to call back the officer from the GALACTICA. He knew who it must be.

Three young people stood to attention at Cain's approach, their gear at their feet. He studied each pilot thoroughly -- no reason to let Adama's people off easily, even if the man *was* an old and trusted friend. These pilots had to live up to *Cain's* standards now.

"You are...?" he asked the first man.

"Lieutenant Bojay, sir."

A rather average-looking youth. Light brown hair, blue eyes, medium height and build. Nothing very spectacular, except for the defiant pride in his gaze and stance. It boded well for him; before this mission was over, that pride would be from belonging to *Cain's* crew, from flying with the PEGASUS. *The boy will do, and do well...*

The Commander moved on, then started in amazement as he took a good look at the young woman standing before him.

"I'm Lieutenant Celeste, sir. Celene is my sister."

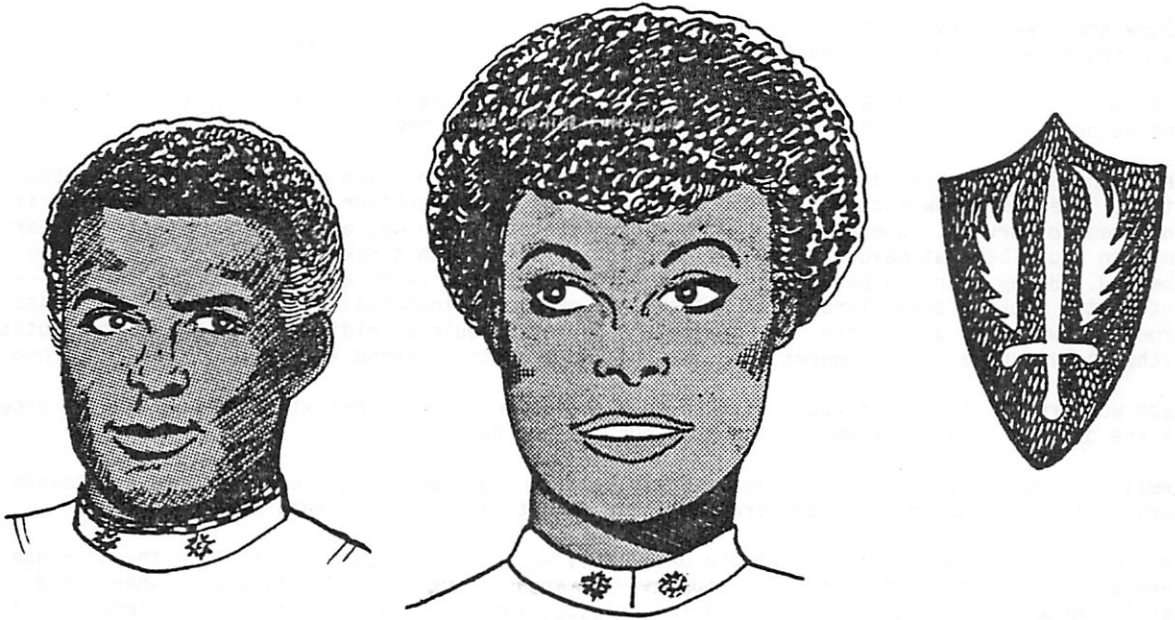
She must be used to being confused with the other girl. Little wonder, when they both shared light golden skin, dark brown eyes, jet black hair cut in a close cap around the head. She was as short as her sister, too, and must have barely qualified for pilot training. Cain cast a surreptitious glance at her hands. The minor genetic fluke had given this sister an extra finger as well, but on the left hand, not the right. She must have noticed, for she flushed slightly, and moved her hand from sight. *Well, if she's as good as her sister, she's welcome here...*

"And you?" he asked the last man in the short line.

"Lieutenant Paris, Commander."

A maverick, like myself... Paris had worked his way up through the ranks, rather than going to an Academy and obtaining a commission. He was approximately Cain's height, with dark hair, a thin face, a sallow complexion. Cain felt uneasy about him. The man was competent, he knew, but there was an impression of hidden, banked fires under that expressionless visage -- something that lured, yet warned of danger at the same time. *I'll never completely trust him, but from the reputation he's built up, I'll expect a great deal...*

Cain glanced around. Devon, his Flight Commander, was nowhere in sight, but Sheba was hovering nearby. "Lieutenant," he called commandingly.



Gennie
Summer '83

"Sir?"

"Show these Warriors to their new quarters. Bojay and Celeste will fly with Silver Spar; Paris will join Bronze Wing. Bojay, Lieutenant Sheba will be your wingmate for the present. Dismissed."

The Commander glanced once more at the shuttle, but then a call from Major Daniel distracted him, and he hurried away, leaving his daughter standing with the newcomers.

Sheba and Bojay studied each other frankly and openly, knowing each would need to learn about the other. They knew how much they would come to depend on one another during this mission -- if they intended to survive. Sheba thought with a pang that this man was about as different from Garnyd as any man could be, but maybe that was a good idea. She couldn't make comparisons between the old and the new. Bojay, for his part, privately concluded the lady -- he already knew who she was -- was a lot better looking than Starbuck or Boomer, his previous wingmates, but reminded himself that the true test would be under fire. A Commander's daughter could be riding on her father's reputation -- although he'd never even suggest such a thing where another friend -- Apollo -- was concerned.

Each wondered if the other would live up to expectations, if the new wingmate would be as dependable as the old, as close a friend as the previous partner had been...

"Well, if you'll follow me..." Sheba finally said, and gestured with her uninjured arm toward the turbolift. The new crew members grabbed their flight bags and fell into line behind her.

Colonel Tigh, Executive Officer of the GALACTICA, watched the departing pilots with no change in his carefully set expression. He still stood in the arch of the shuttle's hatchway, where he'd observed Cain's inspection and acceptance of Paris, Celeste, and Bojay, and heard their assignments given to Lieutenant Sheba. By not leaving the shuttle, he'd spared himself the necessity of exchanging polite formalities with the Commander of the PEGASUS, while fulfilling his duty to see the Warriors officially transferred to another command.

Now, however, he was uncertain whether to simply leave the PEGASUS without speaking to anyone, his duty complete, or to seek out the person he'd come here to see.

The choice was removed from his hands when a female Warrior stepped from one of the turbolifts. His eyes met hers in sheer astonishment for a centon; then they both looked away.

"I'll be back in a centon," Tigh called to the shuttle's pilot.

The young Warrior nodded wordlessly, but his curiosity was aroused. Lieutenant Apollo could read the tension in the senior officer's stance, and wisely asked no questions. Whatever the feud between Tigh and the famous Commander Cain, the young man instinctively sensed there would be Hades to pay if he got involved. He also suspected the Colonel would rebuff any questions on his part.

Tigh strode across the deck, making for the motionless woman who awaited him, studying her as he walked. The stresses of the past sectors had been kind to her. She was as beautiful as always, with her clear ebony skin, her swept-back dark hair, and her perfectly fashioned eyebrows, now arched in surprise over wide brown eyes.

Colonel Kleopatra, recently appointed Executive Officer of the PEGASUS, stood in frozen silence, watching as he closed on her like a Cylon Raider streaking in for a kill. Her heart in her throat, her duty momentarily forgotten, she tried to calm her breathing. She knew Tigh was too controlled an individual to argue with her in public, or to provoke any kind of scene, but the feelings they'd once had for each other were still strong in her, still evoked a thousand memories and emotions, and she had to be as controlled as he in order to remain true to herself.

The two Warriors faced each other across a few feet of deck. Tigh unconsciously raised a hand, as if to stroke her cheek, then dropped it stiffly to his side, with a somber grimace. Kleopatra knew the gesture from any number of private greetings and centars spent together, and inwardly mourned the loss of intimacy, but she refused to let it show.

"Hello, Tigh," she said after a moment, her musical voice low, still hoping the strong, wounded man before her would relent for just a micron, would unwind long enough to gain something of value from this discussion.

"Hello, Kleopatra." He didn't call her Klea anymore, either. "You got what you wanted, I see."

She smiled at him, no anger in her expression, saw the silver beginning to touch his tight black curls, knew there was similar colouring in her own dark hair. They'd always been a handsome pair, and they'd once been happy, too. But there was no easing of the frozen set to his shoulders.

"Not everything I wanted," she sighed. "Oh, Tigh, why did it have to be this way? Why couldn't we...?"

"You know how I feel about Cain," he interrupted harshly. "There can be no compromise on that."

"I know, you think he cost you a command of your own -- and he offered me the post of the man who got your job. For that, you hate him. For that, you can't stand the thought of me serving on the PEGASUS. This is a good ship, Tigh, and Cain is a good Commander. It's an excellent opportunity. Why did we have to let it come between us?"

"If it had been any other ship... I wouldn't have minded another ship, but you couldn't wait, not even a little while. Klea..." -- he still knew her name! -- "Do you realize we may never see each other again?"

"We never saw each other before!" she shot back in protest. "You were always gone!" Her voice grew calmer, although her emotions did not. "I was always planet-side, serving at ground bases, waiting for an opportunity like this. You knew I wanted to return to space. I'm a Warrior; I couldn't wait forever. Respect that, please, even if you don't approve of my decision, even if you can't live with me for it."

Did she imagine that his expression softened a little? Maybe it was just a trick of the light...

He sighed in acceptance. "I wish there'd been another way, another ship. Maybe I shouldn't have... I don't know if things could've been any different... Well, it's done," he finished abruptly, not knowing what else he could say. "You'll be under way in a few centars. I wish you luck...in everything. I think you'll need it."

"Cain's not the monster you think he is. I hope some day you can accept that."

"Monster? No -- just too close to being declared a Colonial deity for my liking. Goodbye, Kleopatra."

"For what it's worth, I'll miss you, you stubborn man." She leaned across the small space between them, briefly touched his unyielding lips with her own, then stepped back again. "Goodbye."

There seemed nothing left to say. Talking hadn't solved anything; this last centon made no difference in their lives. Tigh took a deep breath, forced a smile for her, and turned back to his waiting ship. Kleopatra knew pain at his every step, and knew he felt it, too, saying goodbye to a part of their lives. He would be a very difficult, silent man during the next few days; she briefly pitied the pilot of his shuttle.

Her fixed smile remained; he made no backward glance or gesture. She finally dropped her eyes as the shuttle hatch closed, and stared at the tape in her hand for a long moment before seeing it. As the small craft launched -- rather hastily -- Kleopatra turned away. They'd made their choices. Now, they had to live with them.

* * * * *

Major Daniel and Captain Veleda had requested a personal conference in the Commander's quarters; Cain had agreed, certain the matter to be discussed was the Viper explosion of their ship-time morning.

The three gathered, each with reports and statistics. The Commander's figures concerned rescheduled departure times, which needed certain variables to be supplied by the other two. Daniel's report would presumably be on the cause of the explosion. Veleda's statistics would concern how long it would take her Damage Control personnel to repair the mess. Once he had their reports, Cain could report back to High Command just how long a delay could be anticipated before they proceeded to Molukai.

He took his customary place at his desk, still wearing the pilots' garb he was so at home in. One of his favourite riding crops lay on the desktop before him, an anachronism symbolic, to the Commander, of the oldest days and reputations of Warriors.

Daniel and Veleda sat beside each other on the opposite side of the desk. Each officer had access to the computer terminal and the main communications console on the Bridge, should it prove necessary to call up further data.

"What have you got, Major?" Cain asked briskly. Several centars of worry had left no mark on his face or in his voice. Cain was Cain, the consummate Warrior, in whatever he did.

Major Daniel leaned on the arm of his chair, lips tight, rubbing at his temple. "Something exploded on that Viper. The tylium fuel tanks and laser weapons burned and also exploded, igniting the Vipers alongside. Four Vipers are completely destroyed, five others damaged but reparable. Four people are dead, three others have serious injuries, and a handful have assorted minor scrapes." He dropped his computer link and looked directly at the Commander.

"I understand Lieutenant Garnyd mentioned something about sabotage," he said slowly. "If so, the incendiary device must've been of a completely new type, some kind of tylium derivative, not solenite, because it didn't show up in any of my tests. Whatever caused the explosion was completely destroyed in the fire. Medical can't get anything more from the bodies; they're too badly burnt.

"We searched every Viper and shuttle aboard the PEGASUS, but found nothing else out of the ordinary -- at least, nothing potentially explosive or which could be used by saboteurs.

"In short, I can't tell you how the explosion occurred -- yet. But I'm still working on it. I hope that is sufficient, Commander, because it's all I can give you at this time."

Cain's eyes narrowed. It wasn't often something eluded Major Daniel's searching gaze, and he knew the man wouldn't rest until the cause of the explosion had been determined. Well, the next matter was how long it would take to repair the damages, now that all available information had been gathered from the scene. He turned to Captain Veleda. "Well, Captain?"

The classic-featured brunette shifted in her seat, crossed her long legs, then glanced at the print-out she held. "The Vipers have already been replaced. We haven't been able to work on that area of the bay, since Daniel's been going over every smoke stain with a molecular scanner, but I anticipate no more than a few centars to repair the tubes and the tracks. If there's any beam work that needs doing, which is possible, it may be another day or two. We can, of course, concentrate fully on this, since it's very localized, with no battle damage to divide our attention." She glanced at Cain. "Will that do, Commander?"

Knowing Veleda, she'd push her people to the limits. Cain had a crack crew, and he knew it. The work would be completed within a day, and possibly overnight. He leaned back, considered momentarily, then glanced abruptly at Veleda. "Can you guarantee a day?"

"I think so," she replied. "I know my crew."

He nodded. "So do I." Her confirmation was all he needed. The Bridge was on stand-by; he punched a button. "Commander Hera, on the BRITANNICA," he said without hesitation.

"I'm here, Cain," his fellow Commander replied only a micron later; she'd been expecting his call. "What's the word over there? My people are eager to go."

"The word's good. Damage Control assures me we can be ready within the day, and Security is working on the cause of the explosion. Considering the importance and delicacy of our mission, I think we should get under way as soon as possible. Lead out with the BRITANNICA; we'll pull rear guard with the PEGASUS until repairs are completed."

"The flagship at the rear?" the woman inquired with a smile in her voice. "Cain, that's not like you."

"We'll be right behind you, and we'll catch up as soon as we can. High Command's nervous about this one. I assume you're ready to leave?"

"The entire Fleet's been ready for centars," she confirmed. "That's why Count Baltar was making his inspection rounds this morning. With your permission, we'll break orbit in a few centons."

"All right, then. We'll see you as soon as we catch up. The Lords of Kobol be with you."

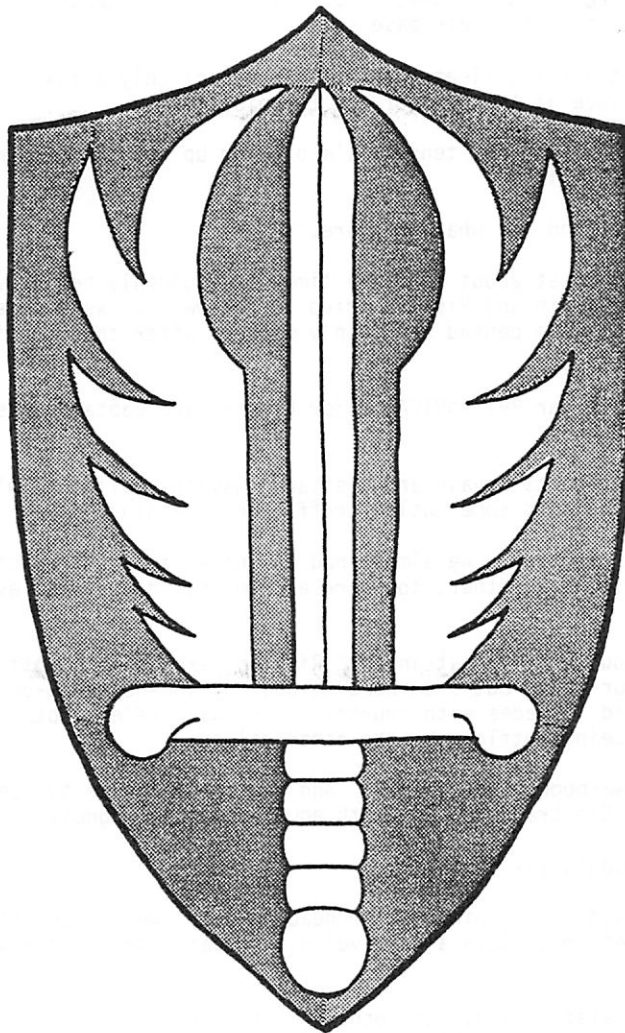
"And with you, Cain. We'll be looking for you."

Colonel Kleopatra was on watch. She reported the BRITANNICA leaving orbit moments later, with the rest of the Fifth Fleet trailing slowly behind. She sounded distracted. Cain dismissed his two officers before watching the departure of the Fleet.

All the ships were identified on his screen, and were in perfect flight formation. The battlestar BRITANNICA took the lead, a position the PEGASUS would've had, her Commander thought with some regret, if not for the explosion. A pair of cruisers flanked the larger ship, with half a dozen assorted smaller craft behind them. Behind that motley group were two more cruisers, with the battlestar OLYMPUS in the rear. A few Vipers showed up on the scanner, taking patrol positions.

Cain turned off his small screen and sat down heavily, staring through his port window at the rounded green-and-white curve of the planet Caprica. *Another day, at most...* But until then, he had very little to do.

The riding crop slapped gently against the desk, a repeated rhythm that did little to alleviate the Commander's impatience.



III

"We can head in any time," Gavain said into his com.

"Might as well, then, since the next patrol'll be on our tails in a few centons otherwise," his wingman replied through the filtering of his helmet's communications system.

The two sections since they'd left Caprica had been uneventful. The Fifth Fleet had encountered no Cylons, and they were now beyond the fringes of Colonial-dominated space, where, logically, there ought to be an abundance of their metal foes. They still had a considerable distance to go before reaching Molukai; out here, they might find anything.

Both battlestars had full patrol rosters up at all times. Lieutenants Gavain and Rissian of the OLYMPUS pulled a flank patrol -- which discovered nothing more interesting than a stray comet -- and they were finally due to return to their base ship.

The PEGASUS, flagship of the Fifth Fleet, was at last report only a few centars from rejoining them and taking her rightful place at the head of the Colonial forces.

"Hey, Gavain," Rissian said, suddenly tense, "I'm picking up something on my scanners. Coordinates 9-0, 1-7, 5-2. Do you see it?"

"Yeah, two targets. Let's find out what they are."

The "targets" discovered them at about the same time, and suddenly began evasive manoeuvres as the Warriors closed on them. Gavain and Rissian tried to follow, but were hopelessly outflown. Another moment, and the other ships were behind *them*; only microns after that, their pursuers identified themselves.

"This is Patrol Five, battlestar BRITANNICA, Major Electra and Captain Orestes. Who're you?" a feminine, teasing voice asked.

"Patrol Two, OLYMPUS, Lieutenants Gavain and Rissian," Gavain replied slowly. "How'd you know who we are? We thought we'd run into some outlaw traffic or something."

"So we figured. Told you, brother. We almost had an intra-battlestar incident this morning, two patrols who didn't recognize each other, so we're exchanging idents with everything but confirmed strangers."

"And how, dear lady, do you confirm a stranger?" Rissian asked in his most charming voice. "I doubt they'd stop with a 'by-your-leave-but-I-am-here-to-destroy-you-hope-you-don't-mind.' Cylons, anyway. They shoot first, and to Hades with courtesy." He was miffed, both at not recognizing the BRITANNICA Vipers and at being outflown by the other pilots.

"That's why they give us warbooks, dear heart. And the intelligence to use them is supposedly one of the job requirements," Electra responded with equally sweet smugness.

There was very little he could say to that.

Gavain took up the conversation. "Going in, or heading out? We're just finished, ourselves, and I'd love to meet the possessor of such a sexy voice," he said, dropping his already deep voice another half-octave.

"Watch how you talk to my sister, kid," the other pilot spoke up for the first time -- other than a muttered grunt when his sister apparently won a bet in identifying them before he did.

"You mean we gotta go through *you* to meet *her*?" Gavain quipped. "I thought that custom went outta style yahrens ago."

"Well, that explains it," Orestes replied, quick on the uptake. "That ancient custom came back in style this morning." His sister giggled. "But then," he continued, "that's the OLYMPUS for you, always a bit behind."

"Watch how you talk about my home base tub!"

Having exchanged the expected gibes, the two patrols called a truce and laughingly went their ways. Long patrols could be extremely boring ones when nothing was in sight, and the small insult barrage, entirely good-natured as it was, refreshed all concerned -- including the Bridge officers on both battlestars, since the patrols were close enough to them to be monitored.

The two OLYMPUS pilots returned to their ship with no more sightings of unidentified objects, and coasted to their usual perfect landings. Both headed for a turbowash after decontamination and debriefing, and planned a quick game or two of pyramid before calling the day complete.

Gavain was a swarthy, muscular Sagittaran. His main diversion was singing opera -- bass parts, preferably in the turboshower -- and singing well, despite his friend's constant taunts.

Rissian was more slender, of the same height, with dusky black skin; he was a native of Caprica. His hobbies included trying to find ways to stop his wingman from singing in the shower. Today, as usual, he failed, and Gavain completed the first aria of the hero of *Warrior's Oath*, an old Sagittaran drama, before finally stepping out and towelling himself dry.

Rissian was waiting for him. "While you were making your presence known in the shower," he announced, sounding disgruntled, "we got tagged for some extra duty."

His friend was unconcerned. "So? What kind of duty?"

"They discovered a small leak in one of the coolant systems in the solium storage centre."

"Solium storage? That could be trouble. So what're we supposed to do about it? Isn't that for Damage Control to worry about? Or Maintenance?"

"Yeah, but apparently there's some regulation about somebody having to stand guard duty while the stuff's being moved, to prevent thieves from killing themselves, or some stupid thing like that. We're now officially solium guards." Rissian snapped a fancy salute and bowed mockingly in the direction of the ship's banner on the far wall. The laurel-and-flame image on the flag gave no response.

Gavain grumbled momentarily, but he was dressed in a centon. "How'd we get stuck with this job, anyway? We just finished a long patrol, and sentry duty's Security's job."

"Must have something to do with a Bridge officer hearing you refer to the OLYMPUS as a 'tub'."

"Oh. Nosy bastard."

* * * * *

"Nice guys," Orestes commented, shifting his position in the Viper cockpit. He was only slightly above average height, but he always felt cramped inside the fighter; at times, he could be somewhat claustrophobic. He and his sister had just ended their encounter with the two pilots from the OLYMPUS, and they still had long centars in space ahead of them, with no further contacts to relieve the boredom.

"If you like bold men," was Electra's demure reply. She was used to advances from the men she met; she was a beautiful woman. With her lively disposition and her passion for life, she didn't always rebuff them, either.

Electra and Orestes were the best strike team aboard the BRITANNICA, and had flown together since their Academy days; they were an almost unbeatable team, knowing one another's moves and ways of thinking. Electra was Kell Squadron's flight leader, behind Major Quillan, the battlestar's Flight Commander, but the difference in rank made no difference in the relationship between brother and sister.

"I've always known you to like bold men, Electra," her brother commented. "Though it's hard to find one to match you. Boldness got you that promotion at the Battle of Five Moons -- almost got you killed there, too."

"And your boldness got you a wrecked Viper," she reminded him, laughing. "We're both too lively for our own good, I think."

"If I hadn't gotten hurt at Five Moons, we'd've both gotten our captain's stars..."

"And we wouldn't be flying together now, if we had."

"Are you glad I nearly lost my head?" Orestes demanded.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," she replied calmly. "Though I suppose some day they're bound to split us up, if we both make flight commander..."

Wingmates couldn't afford to be angry with each other for long, and these two had depended on one another far too long and in far too many ways ever to become enemies. Their father, from Taura, had died before they were born, or so their mother always maintained. She'd come from a well-to-do Caprican family, part of the traditional aristocracy; her family had never quite reconciled themselves to a daughter who did as she pleased. As a consequence, the twins rarely saw much of their mother's family, and never even knew their father's kindred. They made no claims on either side.

A Warrior's career seemed ideal, so both entered the Academy on Taura, their father's home world. They were good at their chosen profession, thriving on the adventure, and even having fun with the routine. Their home was the stars; the BRITANNICA pilots and crew were their chosen family.

Electra checked her scanners. They'd encountered no space traffic for several days -- no Cylons, no Colonials, no pirates, nothing. Good flying practice for cadets, but unsettling for seasoned Warriors who knew the space-lanes well.

"Something at the fringe, Major." Orestes was suddenly the competent wingman. "Could be another of the OLYMPUS patrols, I suppose; it's in the right quadrant. But they shouldn't be big enough to show on our scanners at this range..."

"So let's check it out. Be ready for anything." The touch of a single switch assured the two pilots of a private frequency as they left their planned course and went to investigate.

Whatever it was, the thing was fairly small for a space vessel, even if too large for a patrol ship. The scanners fed data directly to the warbook, but that particular computer file didn't give them an answer. They knew it wasn't Colonial. It also didn't appear to be Cylon. And it definitely wasn't a natural phenomenon.

"I see it!" Orestes suddenly shouted. "There! It's a ship, but, oh, Lords, just look at it!"

Lords, indeed, Electra thought a moment later as the ship came into her sight. Where in Hades did that thing come from?

* * * * *

Cain had found the last section to be totally boring, unfruitful, and very nearly frustrating. His PEGASUS had trailed the Fifth Fleet for two sections, and had spotted virtually nothing in the last few days. He was a man of action, and this forced slow sailing was not his style. Couldn't they even encounter a few pirates to sharpen his people up?

At least, he managed to console himself, the slow cruise had given the Damage Control teams time to complete all the necessary repairs.

And Sheba was now back on the flight roster, breaking in her new wingmate -- Bojay, the GALACTICA volunteer. Her arm and wrist were completely healed, although her shoulder was still a little stiff and occasionally caused her pain. It was nice to have a little time to spend peacefully with her, after the last argument over Cassiopeia. The injury seemed to have mellowed his daughter's anger, or maybe she'd forgotten the other woman completely, intentionally or otherwise.

Cain found himself devoting less time than he should to making a decision about Cassie, despite the long journey; he justified it with work -- his ship came first, and his mission. Soon, they'd re-join the Fifth Fleet. Viper patrols from the other battlestars kept cropping up on their scanners, and the PEGASUS had increased speed to close on them.

Captain Velea had done a good job. There was no major structural damage to his ship, and Cicero, the taciturn head of Maintenance, reported no problems since completion of repairs. Velea was, technically speaking, under Cicero's command, since Damage Control was actually a specially-trained branch of Maintenance.

The speaker on his desk beeped in the silence of the room. The Commander turned from his contemplation of the stars and strode to his desk, touching a switch and noting that the call was from the Bridge. "Cain here. What is it, Kleopatra?"

The face of his Executive Officer appeared on the screen. "One of our patrols picked up something strange on their scanners, sir. They suggest we investigate, as there is also a BRITANNICA patrol on the scene, with a senior officer who'd like our intervention. Shall we alter course?"

"I'll be there in a centon." He flicked off the com, grabbed his jacket, and headed for the Bridge.

He could feel the tension as he entered the massive "brain" of the battlestar. All eyes were on the command deck. The helmsman and navigator were waiting for orders; he could sense their anticipation, and knew they already had the coordinates of the strange "something." Tolan was at the scanners, and Kleopatra hovered at his shoulder, one eye on the small screen, the other on the huge star-screen above the main-floor consoles.

"Let's see what it is," Cain ordered as he ran up the command deck steps. Tolan entered a code; the woman at the computer bank console responded; and a small figure was outlined on the grid of the command console's screen. Tolan vacated his scan post and returned to his usual position as Flight Officer. The young scan officer resumed his post.

The Commander studied the odd-looking ship displayed by the computer screen. "Warbook?" he demanded tersely. It must be something new, since it hadn't already been identified, but a check might show what it resembled, who might have built it. The thing was now within PEGASUS scanning range, and the battlestar's massive computers carried far more information than the small Vipers could ever hope to handle.

Tolan's response was brisk and formal. "Sir, the warbook has no record of any such ship in use today. It's not Colonial, nor is it Cylon. It isn't Delphian, and cannot be traced to any of the known extra-legal organisations in this quadrant. We simply don't know what it is, Commander.

"The life form readings the scanner points out are from our own Viper patrols, one from the PEGASUS, the others from the Fleet; they've all identified themselves. They couldn't halt the entire Fleet to check out one small bogey, but as we're still in the area, we could divert with only a small delay..."

"Commander," Kleopatra cut in, narrowly eyeing the vessel read-outs, "that ship looks old, even allowing for all the damage it's apparently taken. Switch to history banks, I think. They may show something."

The woman at Computer Systems responded immediately to the Colonel's suggestion, and fresh data began to flow across Tolan's screen. He studied it closely for a centon before reporting.

"The possibility exists that the ship is Hsarri, Commander," he declared, sounding somewhat astonished. "It's not exactly like any known Hsarri ship, but the trace elements and certain design principles are similar to some of the old ones. But the Hsarri were wiped out generations ago... weren't they?"

Cain glanced at his Executive Officer; Kleopatra was a wealth of interesting and unusual facts about ancient societies. "Well?" he asked.

She pursed her lips and thought for several microns before responding. "Most of the Hsarri clans were wiped out in the war, when we first fought the Cylons," she began slowly. "The Cylons decimated the population, and made the planet uninhabitable when they saw they might lose the struggle. The survivors, and those who'd fled their home world when the Cylons first attacked, took to the stars. I believe there were a few Hsarri staying in the vicinity of Molukai, at least until a century or so ago, but most of them were reported to have fled to deep space, hoping to escape the Cylons permanently. I didn't think any remained at Molukai, but I suppose there could still be a few, or one of the old ships might have tried to return to home space after a millennium of exile..."

"That ship might be from Molukai?"

"It's possible, though unlikely," Kleopatra replied, staring Cain in the eye.

He frowned, rubbing his chin as he considered, then reached a decision. "Well, scanners show no life on that ship, but if there's even a chance it's from Molukai, we have to investigate. Senmut, set course..."

"Immediately, sir."

In only microns, the helmsman had the PEGASUS veering from her original course, heading off to investigate the mysterious stranger...

* * * * *

Lieutenant Rissian watched as maintenance technicians carried their solium canisters; no trace of boredom showed on his face. He stamped his feet on the floor; solium might be relatively stable in its present form at this low temperature, but the chill crept into his human body despite the heavy parka he wore. All the solium was being transferred to another storage chamber elsewhere on the battlestar, until the leak in the coolant system could be located and repaired. None of the techs remained in the chamber long enough to get frost-bitten, but Rissian was sure his fingers and toes would never thaw again.

He glanced across the nearly empty compartment and caught his wingmate's eye. Gavain strolled across the chamber to join him in his corner near the thickly insulated door.

"I thought when I signed up that I was guaranteed no ice planet duty," Gavain grumbled. A small cloud of ice crystals formed as he spoke.

"I had duty on that ice station on Aries' moon. I think this is colder," Rissian complained, slapping his hands together to try and restore some feeling to them.

"Almost like a Cylon cold cell in here. Wonder if the Commander's gonna examine our cortexes after we're done here?"

"If we *had* cortexes, we wouldn't be stuck in here. But that's lousy humour, buddy. Nothing funny about the Cylons."

"Depends on how you look..."

"*Call Security!*"

The two Warriors stared at the technician who knelt beside a stack of canisters. The man stared in near-panic at something they couldn't identify.

"What've you got?" Rissian called to him.

The tech glanced nervously at them. "I'm not sure, but I don't like it, and I hope I'm wrong. Call Security, *now!*"

Gavain ducked out the door as the tech carefully moved the small device farther from the stack of explosive containers. Rissian took a step closer, then stopped as the man held up a hand in warning. "If you know what's good for you, Lieutenant, you'll get out while the getting's good! *Nobody else comes in here until Security gets a good look at this thing. Move!*"

The man seemed to know what he was talking about. Rissian followed Gavain out the door.

The two Warriors stayed out of the way as Security personnel appeared to deal with the situation. Finally, one of them emerged, her face ashen and her hands shaking slightly. "Call Commander Theseus," she said.

* * * * *

Cain waited impatiently as the towing shuttle carefully manoeuvred the unfamiliar ship into the landing bay. The Warriors from the different patrols had already landed, and their Vipers were moved aside to launch cradles. The six men and women from those patrols, along with a handful of Security people and an emergency damage team, waited with the Commander.

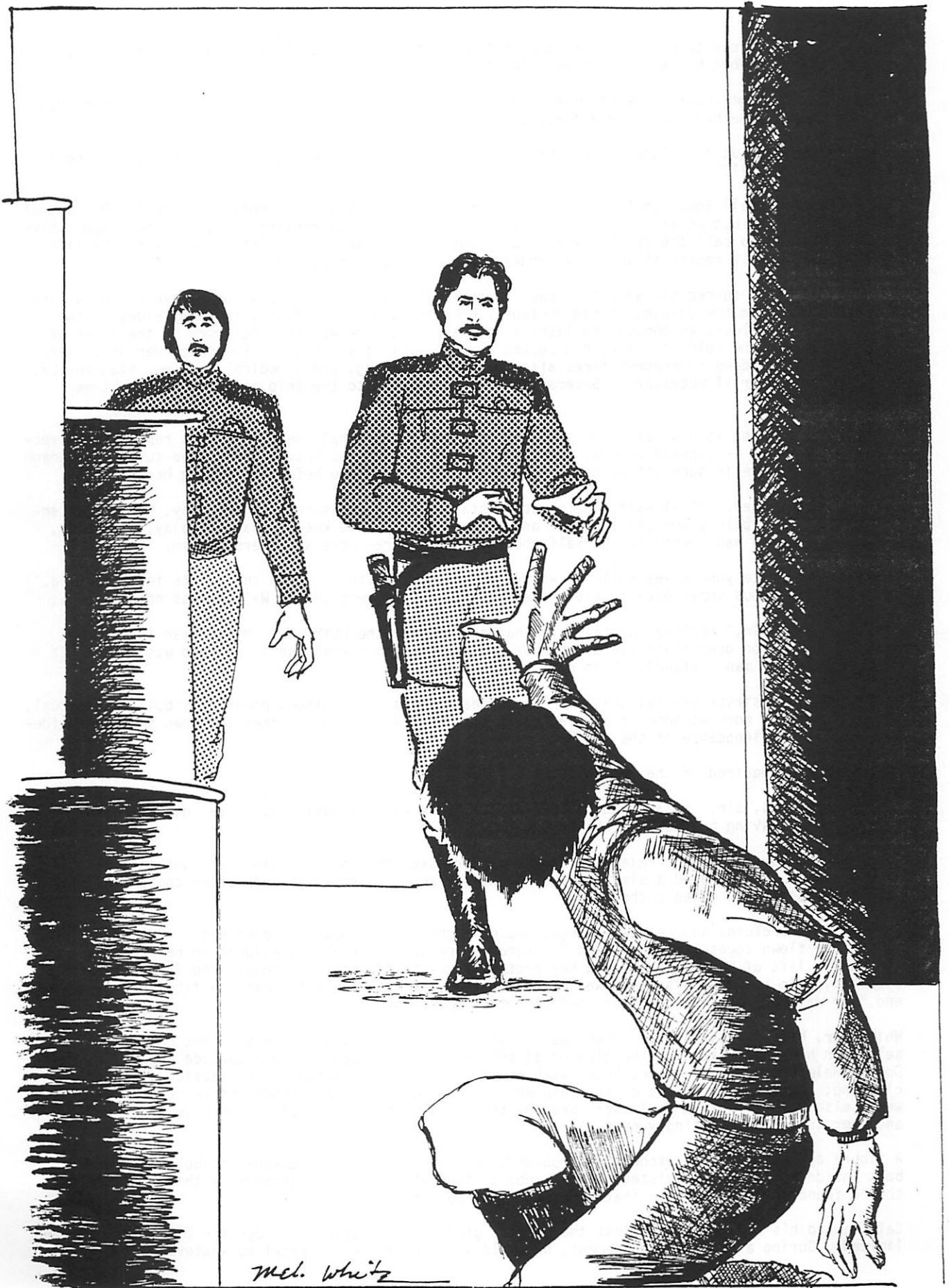
"Power levels almost nil," one of the pilots commented as the small, oval-shaped craft was dragged into a semblance of a landing. "Hard to believe anything could've survived what that ship's been through, and then the cold of space..."

"What?" Cain demanded of the startled woman. "There's something alive in there? Our scanners didn't pick anything up."

"Well, ours showed some life form, when we were close enough to it. Not very strong, and probably shielded, I'd say, but it was still there when we came in..."

"Is a med team standing by?" the Commander snapped at the nearest Damage Control tech.

"Standard procedure," the man replied quickly. "I'll let them know there's a chance of a survivor." He hurried to the nearest com speaker.



"Sheba?" Cain turned to his daughter, one of the pilots who'd brought in the Hsarri craft. He didn't intend it, but his expression was almost accusing.

"I didn't know, Commander," she stammered, shaking her head. "Bojay and I didn't notice anything, but, of course, the Major was there first..."

Cain glanced back at the blonde woman who'd spoken earlier -- she was obviously the "Major" Sheba referred to. "Well?"

"Major Electra, Kell Squadron flight leader, from the BRITANNICA," she replied. "The OLYMPUS patrol spotted it first, but we arrived almost simultaneously. As I was ranking pilot, I took responsibility. I decided to call the PEGASUS when your Lieutenants showed up. By then, we'd lost the life reading, and didn't regain it until we rendezvoused with your ship, sir."

Cain nodded, then turned his attention back to the small Hsarri ship. Low power levels, and a life form aboard. From the damage, it had obviously come through a fire-fight; the very sides of the craft seemed lifeless, as though the laser fire that had blackened them, followed by the frost of escaping air in the cold of space, had sucked away all spirit and power. Emergency personnel were hosing the craft down to prevent fires after the shaky landing, and a medical team was standing by, ready to take over if necessary. Several suited figures ran to the ship as the emergency team pulled back.

"They'll be opening it now, sir. Do you want to stand by, or shall we bring you a report?" He recognized the voice -- Captain Velede, unrecognizable in one of the heavy, protective suits the Damage Control teams wore in such situations. She waited for a response before rejoining her crew.

Cain shook his head. "I'll wait. Go ahead, Captain." As she returned to her duty, he took a canteen to study the pilots who still waited and watched nearby. He knew Sheba and Bojay, of course, and Major Electra had identified herself, but the other three were strangers to him.

"Care to introduce yourselves while we wait?" he asked. "I like to know the pilots in my command." There was imperious impatience in his voice, but it was unintentional. Waiting was not his game.

"Captain Leif, sir," replied the tall, red-haired man from the OLYMPUS. "My wingman is Sergeant Trent. We were on deep flank patrol when we spotted that on our scanners." There was a distinct arrogance in the man's stance. Cain disliked him at once.

Trent, however, struck him favourably. The Sergeant was a dark-haired, powerfully built individual, who was probably more at home on a triad court than in a Viper. Cain liked the open smile and wide-eyed, not-quite-innocence of the youth.

"And you?" he inquired of the last pilot.

"Captain Orestes, sir. Kell Squadron, BRITANNICA." He was obviously much more interested in the Hsarri ship, leaving business to the Major.

"You two, uh, by any chance related?" the Commander asked the woman, seeing he'd get nothing more from Orestes. They shared a similarity of features, and Cain knew siblings often chose to serve on the same vessel when given a choice.

She smiled in return, and he saw strange, amused lights in her nearly violet eyes. "He's my brother. We've flown together for yahrens." There was pride in her voice, evident in her words and in the subtle lift of her chin; she and her brother were obviously a good team. And from her openness with him, Cain assumed this woman was either unimpressed with the fact that she faced a "living leg-end," or was more self-assured and confident than most women he met.

Whichever, his business at the moment was finding out about this alien vessel, not concerning himself with human motivations. He glanced at the ship. A life pod waited alongside the craft, and Doctor Helena had a pair of med techs with her. They were all garbed in antiseptic, disposable clothing; anything coming out of the ship would go through decontamination before being taken anywhere else. The vessel's seals were broken, the hatch open. Cain resisted an urge to sidle closer and peer into that invitingly open door.

A figure appeared in the hatchway; he couldn't tell who it was. It beckoned to Helena, then went back inside. The medics hoisted the life pod to the entrance and disappeared within. Apparently, they'd found something -- and that something must be alive.

Cain tapped his riding crop against the nearest girder. His patience, under the circumstances, was limited. During a military engagement, he could wait and stalk and prowl to whatever extent was

necessary, but before and after the battle, he wanted things to *move*. At least, he had the satisfaction of knowing his people were the best available, and he would have their reports as soon as any information was uncovered. It was disturbing that Daniel still wasn't able to account for that Viper explosion...

The med techs reappeared; the life pod was carefully lowered to the deck, and Helena hurried off with it. The entire tube was draped with a thermal blanket, and Cain thought for a moment that they were too late, that they had recovered only a dead body. Then Captain Velea appeared in the entrance again, holding a small recording instrument. She sent a tech scurrying after the medical crew, then joined the Commander.

"The woman's alive, but in bad shape. Here's the ship's log," -- she handed him the recorder -- "if we can figure out how to play it back. We also recorded the few words she said, if we can translate them. She seemed to be trying to tell us something. I've never heard the language before," she admitted frankly. "She seemed to know who we are, though. Something must be of extreme importance, the way she looked when she was speaking."

"Can you identify the woman's origin? Is she Hsarri?"

"I know nothing about the Hsarri except for a few historical facts, Commander. I can't tell what she is. She looks human, but you'll have to ask the doctors." She glanced away as someone called her. "It looks like I'm needed, sir. If you'll excuse me?" She vanished into the small crowd, running awkwardly in her bulky suit.

"If it's Hsarri, the language should be in the historical linguistics bank," Sheba volunteered, watching her father.

"Only the dry, diplomatic tongue," he replied, "and nearly a millennium out of date. I already checked. But it should give the linguatrons enough to work with." He studied the pilots from the other battlestars. "You're all free to return to your home ships if you wish. You're also welcome to stay if you care to wait and find out more about your discovery."

The Warriors exchanged glances.

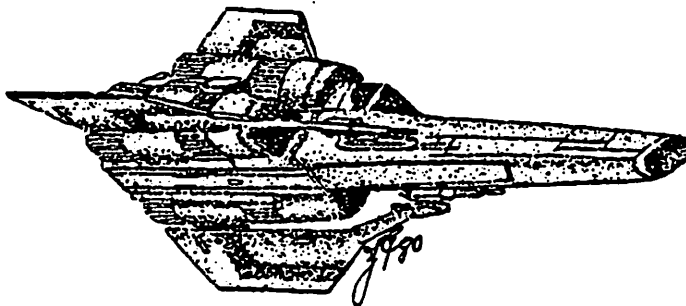
"I think we'd like to stay, if you don't mind, sir," Electra said. Her brother nodded his agreement. Leif and Trent also seemed willing to remain.

"Sheba, why don't you and Bojay take them to the pilots' lounge for a little hospitality. We'll meet again in my quarters in two centars; we should know something by then." Cain nodded his farewell and stepped into the nearest turbolift.

Sheba wished she could accompany her father, but accepted her task as hostess. Bojay had already taken responsibility for the lovely Electra -- he'd taken her arm and was gesturing toward a lift, a charmed and charming smile on his face. The woman didn't seem to mind, but accompanied him willingly enough.

Cain's daughter felt a surge of jealousy, but dismissed it. What did it matter if Bojay found the Major intriguing? Sheba knew she was attractive enough in her honey-blonde way, although she wasn't the devastatingly golden woman this Electra was. She wasn't sure she wanted to be, either. She had enough problems just being Cain's daughter.

At any rate, Bojay's departure left her with three handsome young Warriors, all of whom seemed quite pleased to escort *her*. She smiled at them, and led the way to the lounge.



IV

Commander Theseus of the battlestar OLYMPUS studied the face of the middle-aged explosives expert. The man knew what he was talking about. If he said this was a deliberate attempt at sabotage, with a type of incendiary device previously unknown, Theseus had to believe it.

"Continue," he said evenly. He noticed his own hands were shaking slightly. He willed them to be steady, and tapped his fingers on the desk simply to keep them busy.

The man took a deep breath. "The solium is stable in its present form at usual chamber temperatures. However, this tylium device is not. It could be triggered very easily, perhaps by the concussion of an attack, a laser or missile hit near the storage area -- an explosion, a small fire, unnoticed in the heat of battle, nothing detectable until too late. And it could easily mean the total destruction of this ship -- completely, utterly -- in a matter of microns, if our entire stockpile of solium exploded. It would appear another accident, although one of tremendous proportions -- one of the misfortunes of war.

"And it *has* to be an act of sabotage." The man took another deep breath. He was still a bit shaken by what had been discovered in the solium storage centre. "It's the only answer. It may be connected with that business aboard the PEGASUS, the Viper explosion..."

"Sir, I think we ought to search every millimetre of this ship, and pass the word to all the others. If somebody's trying to sabotage the Fifth Fleet..." He shook his head. "It's hard to imagine, but I think we've got to proceed on that assumption."

Theseus nodded. He glanced at the com panel connecting him to the Bridge and Colonel Mandan, his Executive Officer. "Colonel, you heard. Call Commander Hera aboard the BRITANNICA, and pass the word to all the other ships as well. See if we can reach the PEGASUS, too, either with a direct line or via Viper patch-in. Do it *now*. And get those search teams going. Maintenance, Damage Control, Security, Viper crews -- every spare crew member on board. We've got to go over this entire ship, centimetre by centimetre."

"Proceeding." The red-skinned officer vanished, and Theseus was left with a wide view of the OLYMPUS Bridge.

"Any other suggestions while you're here?" the Commander asked his explosives expert. "If my ship's in danger, I want to know everything."

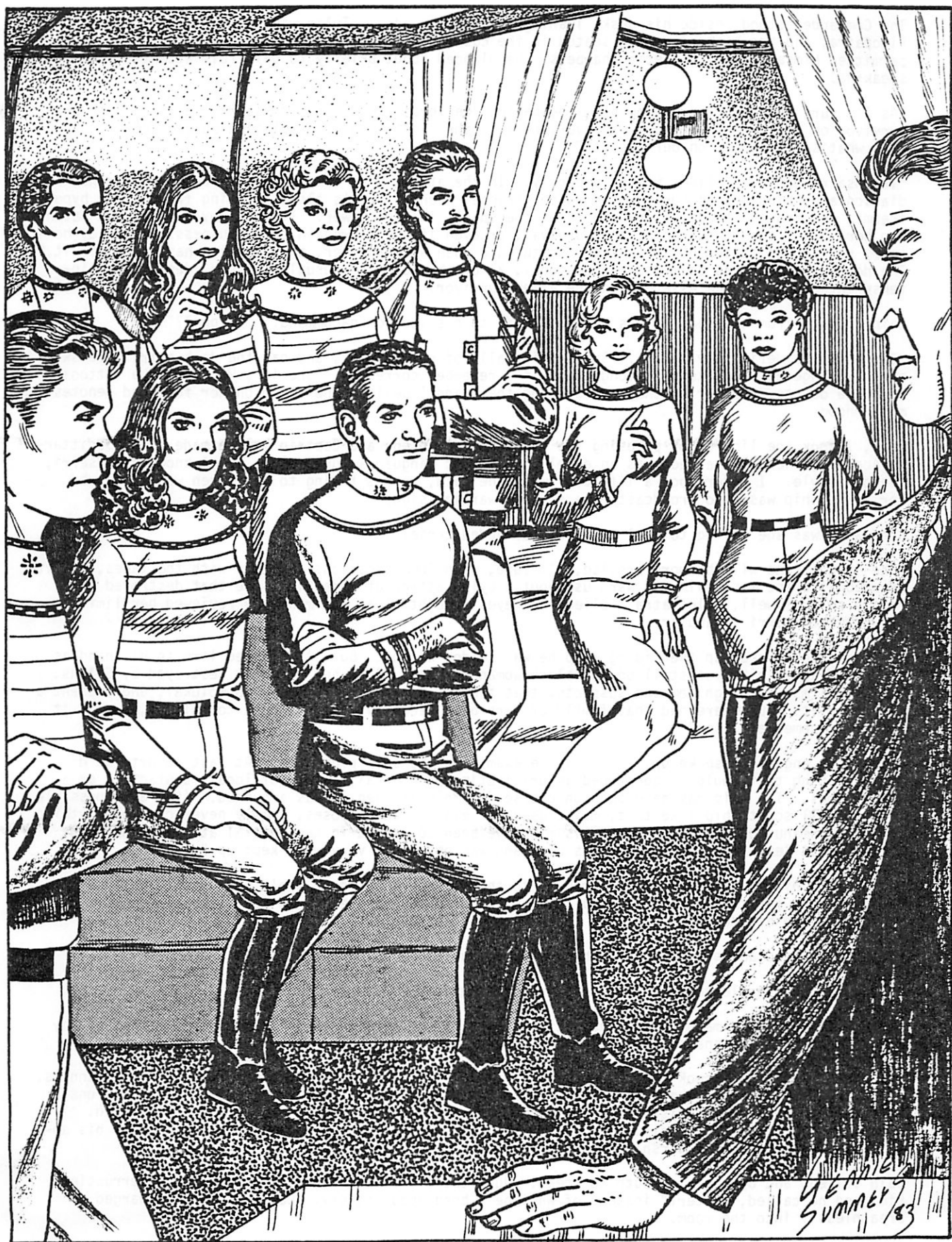
The thought was almost too awesome to contemplate. The PEGASUS had been bombed, and people had died; now, there were explosives aboard *his* ship, and perhaps elsewhere in the Fleet, and they were heading for a dangerous rendezvous. *Damn! What in Hades is going on?*

The threads of thought kept slipping away from him. He urgently wished Cain and the PEGASUS were with the rest of the Fleet. He had an irrational, morbid fear about the next few days. *Well, we'll go through this ship, and warn the others. There's nothing else we can do for the moment. Maybe my nightmares are only that -- bad dreams that warn, but don't necessarily presage destruction...*

He'd had such a warning once before, at the Third Battle of Cimtar, and he'd survived -- been a hero, in fact. *After all, we know what to look for here, now...*

* * * * *

Cain called together everyone who had anything to do with the Hsarri survivor; the group met in his quarters. Colonel Kleopatra was present -- her knowledge of past cultures and history was invaluable, and he considered her as much an expert as the historian also present; that man, to the Commander, was nothing more than a glorified computer technician, hunting data from the battlestar's extensive computer files. Lieutenant Tolan was available to run errands, and to observe the way his Commander's mind worked. Doctor Helena had a report on the stranger's medical condition. Several personnel from other Sections were present for their particular areas of expertise, and Major Devon, the Flight Commander, stood with the Warriors who had located the Hsarri ship; he would report to the rest of the flight roster on whether to search for other vessels or to close patrol ranks as a precaution until they were reunited with the rest of the Fifth Fleet.



The Commander stood beside his desk, leaning against the edge. Tolan was behind him, and Helena, Kleopatra, and the historian were seated in the cushioned alcove that was one of the few luxuries he permitted himself in his ascetic chambers. He glanced about briefly to gain full attention before speaking.

"As I'm sure you're all aware by now," he began, "we've picked up an old Hsarri starship, with one survivor on board." The rumour was everywhere on the PEGASUS, and speculation buzzed freely. "Doctor, what's the report on our visitor?"

"The Hsarri woman is alive, but only barely. In the attack that damaged her ship, she sustained radiation and third-degree burns, along with shrapnel wounds. She's also suffering from severe hypothermia and frost-bite as after-effects of the ship's loss of power. I've got my best medics watching her, but I cannot guarantee her survival, or even if she'll regain consciousness. She did, however, repeat the statement she was trying to make when we found her, and Security has a tape of it." The doctor's voice was calm and professional, almost bored -- her usual attitude, despite the intense interest everyone else had in the alien survivor.

Cain glanced from the head of his medical staff to his second-in-command. "Colonel?"

"The woman is definitely Hsarri. She's originally of human stock, and has the dark hair, pale skin, and six-fingered hands common among them, if I remember correctly. She is a Warrior; the tattoos on her face denote a member of that caste among them, and I believe one tattoo on her forehead denotes motherhood.

"Sir, I took the liberty of perusing the tapes Doctor Helena and Captain Velede made. The Sagittarian Academy, where I trained, has an excellent ancient languages curriculum, and I know some Hsarri, the old style. I understood a little of what she said, or was trying to say, when we discovered her. The ship was also broadcasting a sort of warning signal."

"And what was she trying to tell us?" Cain demanded tersely.

"The linguatrons will be more precise, I'm sure, when Communications finishes with the tapes, but it sounded like she was trying to warn us about a Cylon attack of some kind, one that destroyed her family ship as well," Kleopatra replied, her eyes thoughtful as she mentally reviewed her limited, out-of-date Hsarri vocabulary.

The Commander picked up the riding crop he was seldom without, but it remained limp in his hand as his mind raced, his eyes still on the black woman's face. "So...her ship was destroyed by Cylons. That confirms what High Command suspects, that the Cylons are drawing near to Molukai, and present a threat to it. But where had that family of hers been recently? Had it been to Molukai, or did it come from somewhere else?"

One of the engineers spoke up. "Sir, we're examining the ship right now. At last report, we'd found nothing that could be construed as originating on Molukai, either of local manufacture or as trade goods. The ship may have been on course for Molukai when it was ambushed. It's also possible that a small scout ship like that, maybe used for evacuation purposes, simply never carried anything of foreign manufacture. Such materials might've been destroyed in the initial attack. The scout itself is at least two hundred yahrens old, and was obviously very well kept up."

Cain raised his eyebrows in silent tribute to the engineers and crew who'd kept a small starship in running order for two centuries, despite everything space and the Cylons could throw against it. He stepped around his desk, tapping his cheek with his antique whip.

"Tolan," he said abruptly, "did anything else unusual show up on our long-range scanners?"

The man seemed perplexed, and looked up questioningly.

"Other ships of this manufacture and design? Perhaps the remains of a larger ship? Debris of any kind?" the Commander snapped -- but not in anger.

The young Lieutenant shook his head. "No, sir. An asteroid field at the far range of our scanners, but... However, one of the patrols *did* report the field seemed to interfere with communications, some sort of high-energy disturbance. There *could* be something concealed there," he finished, watching his Commander closely. Tolan was proud to serve as Cain's aide, and was eager for his approval -- indeed, nearly worshipped the veteran Warrior.

Cain smiled, and opened his mouth to speak. Just then, the door annunciator chimed, interrupting him, and he called, "Enter!" instead of what he'd been about to say. Corporal Memnon charged breathlessly into the room.

"Transcripts on the Hsarri's words, sir. We're still working on the log tapes from the ship," the young man reported, drawing to quick attention as he held out a small tape.

The Commander seized the tape from the dark-skinned hand. "You must be in a hurry, Corporal. Are they pushing you that hard in Communications?"

"You *did* say you wanted it immediately, sir. I'll bring the other tape as soon as it's ready." After the "incident" with the civilian socialator at the beginning of the voyage, Memnon was unusually quick at responding to orders, had taken to reading military manuals in his limited free time, and kept a low profile. Cain had only to raise an eyebrow or set down his riding crop, and the Corporal would run to do his bidding.

Cain nodded. "Do so, Memnon. Dismissed."

"Yes, sir!" He snapped a smart salute, turned on his heel, and was out the door as rapidly as he'd entered.

The pilots hid their grins, but Kleopatra chuckled out loud. Memnon hadn't previously been the most military of men, and would probably soon revert to form. Meanwhile... "You're going to have to talk to that boy, Commander. He's spouting regulations at *me* these days."

"A little discipline's good for a change," Cain replied absently, watching the salute and departure with a measure of appreciation. Then he dropped the tape into a reader slot and leaned over to study it. After a moment, he glanced back at Kleopatra. "As usual, you were right. The woman was trying to tell us about a Cylon ambush. Her ship was attacked and destroyed." He turned his attention to Major Devon. "I expect you'll do your best to see the same thing doesn't happen to us, Major?"

The man seemed inclined to scoff at the very idea, but he held his tongue and nodded in assent. The Commander was satisfied. Devon could occasionally be cocky, but he knew his job, and would give it his best. "Good. See that the information on this tape goes into the warbook at once, and inform all pilots to be especially alert for both Hsarri and Cylons. We know they're out there somewhere, and I want them found, preferably *before* they find us."

"Yes, sir."

The Commander glanced at the rest of the Viper pilots. Sheba stood erect, her eyes on him. Bojay was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, but still alert. The Warriors from the other ships stood or sat in more-or-less relaxed poses. The woman from the BRITANNICA -- Major Electra -- seemed to have something on her mind.

"You wish to say something, Major?" Cain asked her politely.

All eyes turned to her, and she licked her lips before responding. "With all due respect, sir, and no slur on your hospitality, but I'd like to get back to my own ship with this information. Our pilots should have this data and be on the alert."

"Wise idea, Major. I assume, Captain Leif, that you'll wish to do likewise. Of course, you're all free to leave. Tolan, see that the information is available to them. It's been a pleasure having you all aboard; I hope we'll be seeing you again." He nodded once to dismiss Tolan, then stepped forward to salute the other Warriors.

Memnon suddenly charged back into the chamber, this time without even announcing himself. "Sir!" He was panting; he'd run all the way from the Bridge.

"What is it?" Cain demanded, a prickly, cold *something* suddenly crawling down his spine.

"Word from the OLYMPUS, sir," he gasped. Leif and Trent stiffened, instantly alert and concerned. "They've found a bomb in one of their solium storage chambers, and they've started a search of the rest of the ship, and warned the BRITANNICA... They've already found another one on the OLYMPUS, and the other ships are expanding their searches ship-wide, every crevice and everything... Commander Theseus and Commander Hera think it might be related to the explosion we had, and they suggest we search, too..."

"On my way, Commander!" Kleopatra vanished through the door, most of the techs following, before the Commander could do more than glance at them. Tolan hesitated only a micron before following, and Memnon hurried out as well.

Cain turned back to the pilots. "Go," was all he needed to say. Electra and Orestes took off at a

dead run. Bojay followed Devon, ready to join a search team. Leif and Trent exchanged glances before abandoning the room, leaving Sheba alone with her father. She stared at him, wide-eyed.

"More bombs?" she asked faintly. "But we searched..."

"Security searched the landing bays, launch cradles, Vipers, and shuttles. They thought they were looking for somebody with a grudge against Garnyd. It looks like they were wrong."

She threw herself into his arms, for a moment only a little girl who needed her father to set things right and make all troubles go away.

He held her tightly for a long moment, understanding, before he spoke. "We'd better go, too, Sheba. We've both got work to do."

She hugged him more tightly. "I thought... It looked like somebody didn't like Garnyd, and I was afraid for him, and a little afraid for me, because I'm his wingmate, and somebody might hate me, too. Not much like a Warrior, I guess, to feel this way," she whispered. "But this is worse, Father. Sabotage in the whole Fleet... What does it mean?"

"I don't know yet, baby."

"I wondered what Zumbro and the others died for. I never thought it might be anything like this. Lords, I hope it's not..."

"I hope so, too, Sheba. And I intend to find out, whatever it is. I have to see Daniel and Velea as soon as possible, to have them ready for anything, and then I've got to get to the Bridge. We have to rejoin the Fleet as soon as we can, and get ready."

"Ready for what?" she asked, her blue eyes fixed anxiously on his face. If he knew what it was, and could deal with it, everything would be all right again. She'd be fine.

"I don't know yet," he responded, some of his customary military briskness returning to his voice and posture. "But the sooner we get to our duties, the sooner we'll figure it out. Go ahead, baby." He kissed her on the forehead, and released her from his arms.

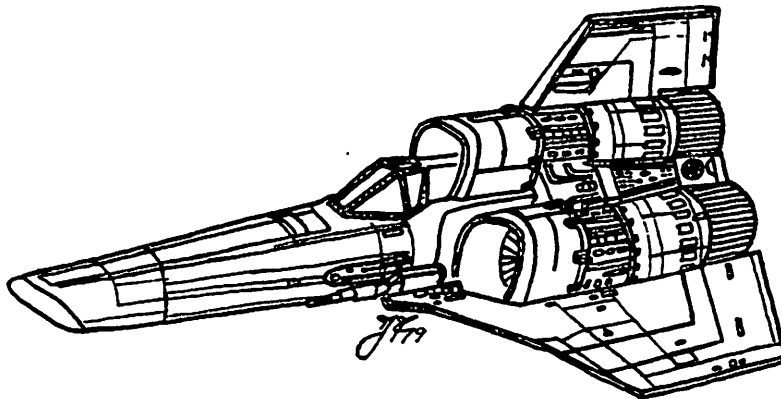
Sheba watched him grab his riding crop and leave the room with only one backward glance. She took a deep breath and sighed. *He's so busy; all this terrible trouble rests on his shoulders, and the burden of the rest of the Fleet, too...*

Well, I'm his daughter, his pride. I'd better get to my post, and do whatever I can. He expects it of me.

Everything will be all right. Nothing can go wrong, not with him in command.

Can it...?

She strode resolutely toward the door, unconsciously mimicking her father's walk, with only a slight feminine sway.



Hera, Commander of the BRITANNICA, stood calmly on her command deck, monitoring the incoming reports from her patrols. Electra and Orestes were still with the PEGASUS, but were expected back shortly. All other patrols had checked in as scheduled, with the exception of Major Quillan, her Flight Commander. He was investigating the asteroid field ahead, and she hoped they'd hear from him soon -- the Fleet would be entering the region of field interference very shortly, and if there were any surprises waiting, she wanted to know about them in advance.

The whole business with the incendiary devices in the Fleet disturbed her, and would have to be dealt with before rumours got out of hand. The search teams had found nothing aboard the BRITANNICA -- yet. Reports from the OLYMPUS stated that three strategically-located tylium explosives had been found and dealt with, although there were still large areas of the ship to be searched; something more might turn up.

Nothing had been discovered on the smaller ships, for which Hera was grateful. It was enough to fear the battlestars were booby-trapped; if the auxiliary ships were also in danger, the risks and the possibility of panic increased geometrically. But the ships of the Fifth Fleet had good crews; they ought to be able to deal with anything they had to face.

If only the PEGASUS would report in... This isn't like Cain...

"Commander, report from Major Quillan," the Communications Officer interrupted her musings.

"Excellent." Hera stepped closer, giving her total attention to the brief, static-ridden report.

"Quillan to BRITANNICA. This is Patrol One. Repeat, the asteroid belt contains ice and rock, with high concentrations of raw tylium, stable in vacuum at low temperature. Do you read? No Cylon activity apparent, but tylium concentration interferes with scanners and communications. Returning to base. Quillan out." The filtered voice died away.

Tylium! High concentrations of raw tylium! Hera was surprised there wasn't a mining colony listed for this area. But with the volume of traffic through the quadrant, maybe even the Cylons didn't want to spend their time constantly defending a settled base. And there was no doubt in the Commander's mind that if anybody began serious mining operations in the asteroid belt, Cylons and pirates would begin to prey upon it. It was too far from the Colonies or Molukai for either power to adequately defend it, and the Delphian Empire was farther still.

Nevertheless, the discovery would be logged and noted; perhaps in a few yahrens, if the humans expanded in this direction, it would become feasible to settle and maintain the tylium belt. If the scanner read-outs were correct, and could be trusted at this range, the belt of loose rock was a large one, circling an old star; the quantity of tylium available might make the investment worthwhile.

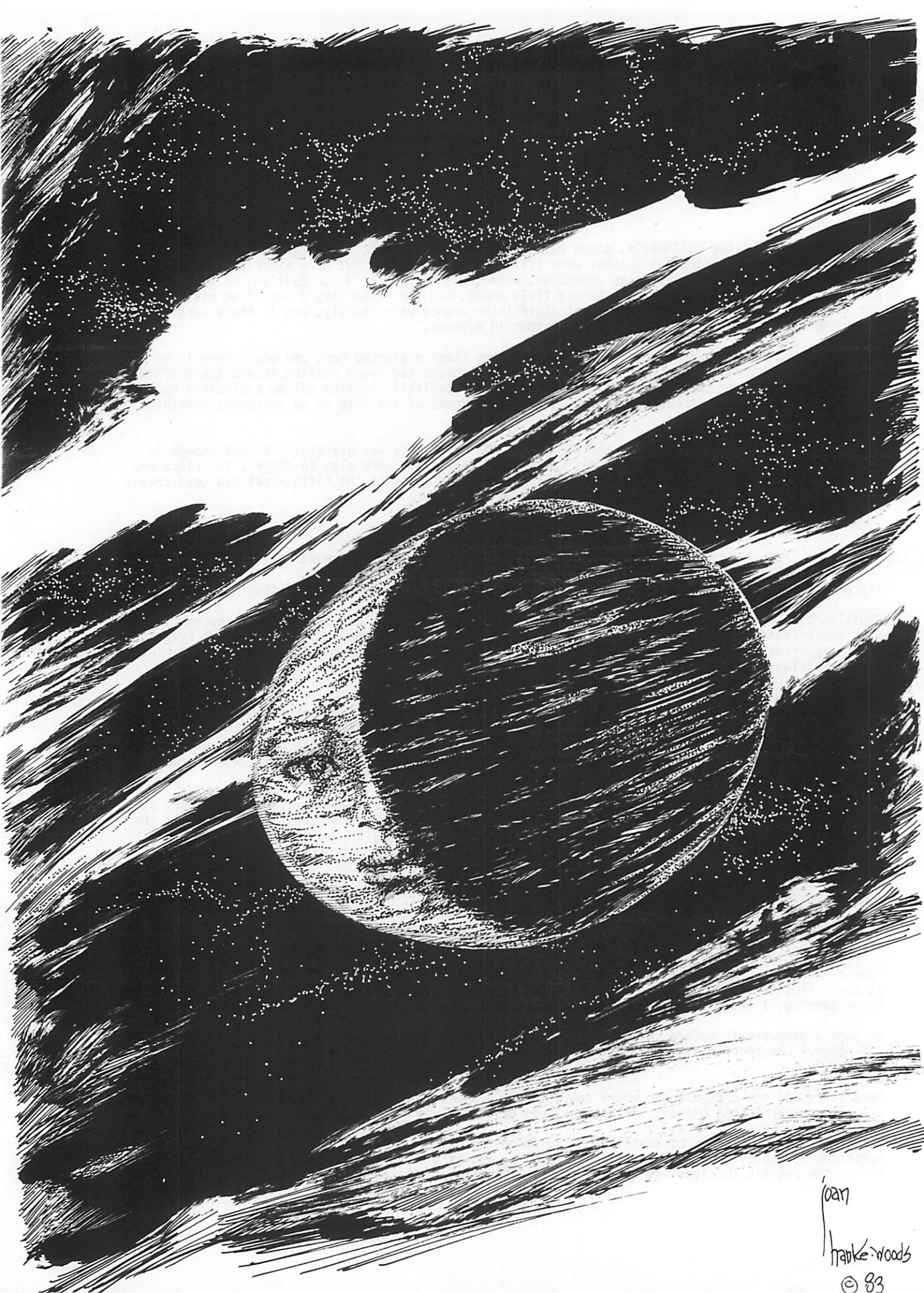
The Communications Officer interrupted her again. "Commander! Major Quillan... He reports... It's breaking up, Commander, but I believe they've spotted a vessel..." The man worked frantically at his board, switching to high gain as he tried to enhance the signal. "Yes! They have! It sounds like..." He tried to make the signal clearer still.

"Damn! They're being jammed, Commander. Electronic jamming, and it sounds..." The man stared up at her. "Automatic distress signals just kicked in from the patrol, but badly garbled. Definitely Cylon jamming; I'm familiar with... No!"

He took a deep breath before continuing. "One of the signals just died, Commander... There goes the other." He shook his head and slammed his fist on the console. "We've just lost Major Quillan."

Hera stared at the empty screen where two distress beacons had shone only microns before, aware of all eyes on her in the ominous silence that had descended upon the Bridge. *Cylons!*

"Inform the other vessels of the Fleet. Try to get through to the PEGASUS if you can, but I'd be surprised if the Cylons aren't jamming us, too, so we can't transmit that far. Warn our pilots, and inform the patrols to close in, if they can still hear us." She glanced at her Flight Officer.



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"Marla, take us to full alert status, all squadrons ready. We may have action soon. I expect the Fleet to respond similarly. Let me know if you can reach the PEGASUS."

Klaxons screamed all over the ship as the BRITANNICA went to alert, and the lights switched to red. Until the situation could be more adequately explained, until all danger was past, the Fifth Fleet would be ready for battle. The Vipers would be fueled and ready, the pilots standing by at their ships. Gunnery would check all armament; Engineering, Damage Control, and Fire Control would be waiting...

Then the nail-chewing would begin, as the crew, at maximum alert and keyed to the hilt, waited for the next move.

After several long centons, Marla reported back to her Commander. "We can't reach the PEGASUS. The jamming's too heavy, on all channels."

Hera took a deep breath, watching her Bridge crew work in the eerie red light of alert status. The PEGASUS was on her own.

* * * * *

"So, Electra, what're you doing this evening?" Leif inquired. "I've got nothing planned myself, and if there's nothing on your calendar..."

"I'm meeting some friends," the BRITANNICA pilot replied casually, trying to restrain her growing annoyance. She'd observed as Captain Leif played up to Cain's daughter aboard the PEGASUS, with no apparent success. Now, he was attempting a quick flirtation with her, and she was determined he'd get no farther than he had with Sheba. She found his behaviour boorish and a bit rude. How had this man gotten his reputation as a Warrior?

"A party? Sounds like fun," Leif persisted, hinting broadly for an invitation.

"Just some close personal friends, Captain. Perhaps another time." The red-headed man was certainly handsome enough, but he had a lousy sense of timing. There wasn't anyone special in her life at the moment, but from what she'd heard and now seen of him, he just wasn't her type. She hoped she could stall him before any drastic action was required on her part. The flight back to their base ships seemed to get longer and longer as the company became less and less appreciated.

Leif finally got the hint, and subsided into sulky silence. He obviously wasn't accustomed to failing in his attempts to charm females, and wasn't too pleased with the rejection.

"Doesn't seem to be a very nice day," Sergeant Trent ventured.

"Shut up, kid. We're on patrol," Leif snapped back.

Electra swallowed a retort about his own non-duty-related chatter in defence of the younger pilot. Trent had to live with the Captain, as well as fly patrols with him. She wondered how and why he managed.

In his own small fighter, Orestes rolled his eyes in distaste. He didn't care for the type of man who boasted of his conquests and prowess with the fairer sex, as Leif had done back on the PEGASUS. The guy was a creep, plain and simple. Probably a competent pilot, since he'd risen to the rank of Captain, but not really a very nice person. He wondered how Trent endured the superior attitude and put-downs Leif dished out so liberally.

Orestes stared at his scanners. Nothing showed, but the grid was breaking up ever so slightly, and a scratching hum sounded through his helmet com, setting his teeth on edge. "Hey, Electra..."

"I see it," she replied tensely. "Somebody's using jamming equipment around here. Battle formation. Leif, Trent, close on us. If we run into anything..."

"...we're on our own," her brother finished for her. "I tried to raise the PEGASUS, but there's no response."

"Major," Leif cut in impatiently, "couldn't it just be natural interference from that asteroid field ahead of us? After all..."

"How in Hades did you ever survive to become Captain?" Electra demanded rudely. "I'm ranking pilot here; I'm taking charge. Battle formation, Captain, and that is *not* a request. Don't you know a jamming screen when you're in one?"

Leif's hand tightened on his ship's controls, and his face went livid with rage, but he obeyed. "Bitch!" he muttered viciously under his breath. With the low-level jamming, no one heard him.

"What're we going to do, Major?" Trent asked. His wingman's behaviour occasionally embarrassed him, but they flew well together. Leif had difficulty enduring competition of any kind, and Trent was quite good at appearing innocuous.

"We're going to be very, very careful, and we're going to find the Fleet as fast as we can -- and we're going to pray we don't find whoever's jamming us first."

* * * * *

Galswintha bent over the injured woman's bed. The long, dark braid of the Hsarri's hair lay limply across the pillow; her slightly tilted eyes were closed and sunken; her pale skin had a deathly pallor. She didn't look as if she would live.

Her chances of survival hadn't been good to start with. Her small ship had been blasted, raked with enemy fire from an unknown foe. Then, she and her companions left for dead, the derelict ship had been abandoned by that foe. Only this one woman, from the half-dozen females aboard the craft, had survived the fire of battle and the cold of space to be found by their patrols, after an unknown period of drifting.

Aboard the PEGASUS, she'd been barely conscious when the medics rushed her to Life Centre; she'd forced words through numb, frost-touched lips before fainting from injuries and pain. They'd done everything they could for her, but even if she lived, the Hsarri would never return to anything near full health. Frozen fingers and toes had been amputated; burnt skin had been peeled away and new skin grafted. Life for this woman would be unpleasant and painful for a long time.

The med tech checked her patient's vital signs again. They were so low and faint it took Galswintha a centon to assure herself the Hsarri was still alive. Then the alien woman muttered something, thrashing with a bandaged, stumpy hand, waking despite the large doses of sedatives and pain-killers.

Galswintha caught her breath as the injured woman's eyes opened to stare up at her in horror. Those golden, pain-filled depths were almost more than she could bear to look into. There was such agony there, and such a great fear...

"Rest," the med tech whispered to her, reaching out to touch her cheek. "There's nothing to hurt you here..."

The alien pulled away, looking as if she would scream.

Galswintha ran for another hypo, but the Hsarri was unconscious again when she returned. She stared at her patient for a long moment, hands clenched, hating her helplessness. Then she turned and stumbled away, trying to hide her tears.

Dr. Rafael watched her go. Galswintha was a vital woman, alive with vibrant passions and emotions. She seemed to impart that life to her patients, refusing to let them feel pain or sorrow. That was part of what made her so valuable to the medical staff, part of what made him love her. The young Scorpion woman brought a unique flair to everything she did. It was hard for her to watch another's pain without trying to help. But here was someone she couldn't reach -- alien, and just that slightest bit beyond a healing touch. Galswintha, for all her skill and talent, couldn't help the Hsarri.

Rafael checked the woman's vital signs himself, shaking his head gravely as he realized they were slipping.

Galswintha knew her duty, and wouldn't leave her patient alone for more than a moment. She returned, her tears under control. Her head was held high, although her lips trembled slightly, and her eyes were wet. She saw Rafael standing at the bedside and slowly went closer.

"It hurts that badly, Winna?" the doctor asked gently.

"There was a look in her eyes, Raf," she replied in her soft, thick accent. "I've never seen such pain, such despair, such fear, as if she'd been betrayed somehow, and by her closest friend. She never expected to wake again, after giving her message. Life is her enemy, and death an eagerly sought friend. I couldn't watch her eyes. The pain was too much for her... I couldn't reach her. She was unconscious again before I could give her anything... She's not going to live, is she?"

"No," he answered reluctantly. "I'm afraid not." The Hsarri was already faltering. A few more centars, at most... The best, and the kindest, thing they could do was let her sleep those centars away without waking.

Galswintha bent her head and put her arms around him. Her own pain was almost tangible. Her gentle hands could do so much, but this time, they couldn't even ease the passage into death. Rafael responded by putting his arms around her and kissing the dark curls that fell on her forehead.

* * * * *

"Commander!" Corporal Memnon called urgently. "We're being jammed! Somebody's throwing a field through this whole sector!"

In an instant, Cain was standing at the shoulder of the young Communications Officer. "Switch to high band," he ordered. "See what you can pull in." He turned away, then stopped for another directive. "And, Memnon, see if you can locate those pilots -- they may know what's going on. Stand-ard procedure for our patrols."

Memnon nodded as his hands flew over the communications console. Flight Officer Tolan and the helmsman were already working on the scanners. The Commander stood back, out of their way, but nothing escaped his piercing, probing eyes. *Soon... The trouble will begin soon. But we'll be ready.*

* * * * *

"Sir, we're picking something up."

"What is it, Kara?" Theseus demanded tersely.

The Scan Officer studied her screen before reporting. "Several waves of small ships approaching, no life readings. Waiting for confirmation check on...warbook confirms -- Cylon. Still scanning for base ships."

Theseus stared balefully at the screen. Cylon attack phalanx! *Of course! The worst possible time for it, so they must attack now. But where are their base ships? There's no Cylon base anywhere in this quadrant. Hades, no known bases of any culture, Cylon, human, or otherwise...*

"Let me know the micron you find anything more, Lieutenant," he said unnecessarily. The woman nodded in acknowledgement, her face drawn into a frown.

The eerie lights of battle alert were joined by the warning klaxons of imminent attack. He heard the flight controller checking launch status and sending out the squadrons. *Competent man, that...*

But there are so many ships in that approaching attack force... Theseus felt a smothering wave of horror, an old haunting feeling that he hadn't experienced in yahrens. Why should it torment me now?

"The BRITANNICA is launching her squadrons," the Communications Officer reported. "Commander Hera's ordered the other ships to fall back, to let us take the brunt of the first attack..."

"Of course." The Commander of the OLYMPUS laughed humourlessly. "We're warships, and Warriors. We're supposed to protect the rest of humanity from things like this..." He had a sudden, terrifying vision -- whether real, or premonition, or vision born of fear, he would never know -- of such an attack falling on the unprepared Colonies, while the Fleet was out here in the middle of nowhere, unable to defend their homes, fighting a losing battle with treason and treachery...

Where did it come from, that ghastly thought?

He couldn't control the fear for a moment; when he regained some semblance of calm, he thought his heart would burst from the force of its pumping, and his veins explode from the pressure of the blood surging through them. *Lords, not now! We have to defend the Colonies -- no, the Fifth Fleet, here and now, the Fleet...*

"Missile posts, stand by for launch. We may have a chance to get close to those base stars, if we can locate them," he ordered harshly. "Ready all laser turrets; we'll be needing them." He had to keep thoughts of the Fleet foremost in his mind, but they kept fading. *The Colonies...* He pushed his fear aside for the moment. They had to protect the less-well-armed ships of the convoy.

"Contact made!" Kara warned. "It's begun!"



* * * * *

Cain stood on the PEGASUS Bridge; he didn't hear the swish of the turbo doors behind him. "All squadrons on stand-by alert," his Flight Officer advised.

"Good work, Tolan. We don't know what we're heading into."

"Commander, I have my report." Cain turned to Major Daniel. "Five bombs located and disposed of. They were found in solium storage chambers, a solium pod in Engineering, and in the landing bay force screen controls. We're still searching, but I believe we've got them all. The pattern the OLYMPUS reported held for us, too, and seems quite logical for sabotage. We won't stop, of course, until we've completed the search."

"Good, good, keep at it," Cain replied absently, glad at least one of his problems was easing somewhat.

Daniel nodded, then vanished into the growing crowd of personnel. The Commander wondered why it took so many people to keep the Bridge running at a time like this, when one man could fly the Vipers that kept them all safe. *Of course, a good wingmate's invaluable...* He smiled ruefully. He was still very much the pilot, not really at home in this crowd.

"Sir!" It was Tolan again.

Cain snapped back to alertness. "Yes?"

"Garbled message coming in, sounds like it's from Major Electra and the other visiting patrol. It looks like the party's already started. They're passing the word, and unless you've got other orders, they're going into battle."

Kleopatra leaned over the scanner console, watching closely. "Sir, if they go in now, they'll never make it -- they'll be dead in a centon. If these readings are accurate, the Cylons are too thick between them and the Fleet."

"Tell them to hold, Tolan. We'll have relief squadrons there on the double -- Silver Spar and Copper Keel. We'll keep the rest for our own defence. Now, *get this damned ship to full alert!*"

Klaxons screamed even as he spoke, and the lights turned demonically red. He leaned over the command deck railing to watch his people prepare to meet their enemy. "Senmut, get us to light speed, and get us there fast!"

The helmsman glanced up, giving a quick thumbs-up affirmation that the order was heard and being executed.

"Squadrons ready? Then *launch!*"

* * * * *

The alert klaxons sent an already bustling Life Centre to the peak of frenzy. Dr. Helena and her personnel prepared for casualties, with emergency surgery units readying themselves and assembling large quantities of bandages, burn medications, pain-killers, infection-fighters of all kinds, and laser implements to deal with the expected emergencies.

"Rafael, you take Beta Bay," the Chief Medical Officer finished her hurried instructions. "And remember, there'll be a lot of burns among the combat casualties, and crash victims on damaged ships who can't make decent landings. Be prepared for anything, and help the most serious cases on a priority basis -- first aid mostly, I suspect -- and get them on their way here."

"Well, you've all been through this before. You know what to do, so I'll skip the rest of the speech. The Lords of Kobol be with us all, in whatever we have to do."

The group scattered into what appeared to be an unorganized mass of people running in many directions, but was really a highly efficient, well-trained group of medical personnel, among the best in the Colonial Fleet. Cain expected the best from everything on his ship, and Helena's standards were, if possible, even more stringent than his where anything medical was concerned. In moments, Life Centre was half empty as emergency teams ran for their posts.

A woman with dark, curly hair that hung in thick ringlets slowly entered the room from an isolation chamber; she radiated misery. She was as much opposite the cool, serene, platinum-blond Helena as one could be.

The doctor sensed her sorrow. "What is it, Galswintha?" she asked.

"The Hsarri woman is dead."

* * * * *

"We'll rendezvous in two centons, Major. Stand by. We'll go get those creeps together." Major Devon radiated a confidence he didn't feel inside. On Cain's orders, Electra and her small patrol waited for him, just beyond the fringes of the battle. The PEGASUS was moving into position at top speed; meanwhile, Silver Spar and Copper Keel squadrons had been sent to help relieve the Cylon pressure on the other battlestars and the Fifth Fleet as a whole. Shortly, the flagship would re-join her Fleet -- if the Fleet still existed.

"We're waiting, Major, but hurry," Electra responded. Was that a trace of fear Devon heard in her voice? "A few ships spotted us, tried to pick us off, but they were no problem. Our scanners show it must be really a mess out there."

"We're almost there," he repeated.

"Yeah. We'll show them!" The new voice was eager.

Devon groaned, recognizing the Cadet. "Look, kid, this isn't a simulation. You be careful."

"I'm not a cadet any more," she replied rebelliously, not appreciating being called a kid.

He could almost see her trying to stare him down. "You're a frakkin' cadet, and you'll be that until somebody with authority says otherwise!" he snapped back. "The Commander pulled you from the Academy as a favour to your father, but being on a battlestar doesn't make you a real Warrior until you've *earned* it. Now, you be careful! And that's an *order*!"

Devon knew he'd been harsh, but felt he had to be. This was no time or place for cocksure kids. Hades of a favour to the girl's father if she got killed on her first combat mission. He still wondered what Cain could possibly owe the girl's parents, to pull her from the Academy three sections early, despite High Command's objections, and take her on a secret mission. But then, Cain was probably the only man who could get away with such a stunt.

But it left him with a kid for a wingmate -- a *good* kid, he had to admit, but still a green pilot with no experience. He prayed he wouldn't have to cover for her on this one. Instinct told him this was no afternoon social they were heading into.

"Merging with your flight pattern," he heard a business-like voice say. It startled him. Had two centons passed that fast?

"Good," he managed to respond. "Be ready... There they are... Okay, let's get involved..."

The PEGASUS relief squadrons swept out of the asteroid field and into the thick of the fray, as Cain wanted.



VI

Theseus stared at the scanners, then glanced blankly around his burning Bridge. The consoles took on the guise of buildings; the crew members at their posts and those fighting the fires suddenly faded to become screaming civilians and innocent, dying children.

Oh, Lords, the Colonies! "Mandan, get this ship ready for full assault," he ordered.

"What?"

"We're going through them. We have to get there in time."

"Molukai?" his Executive Officer asked in disbelief.

"Too late for Molukai. We have to go home, to the Colonies."

What the...? Then Mandan recognized the slightly glazed look in his Commander's eyes, and felt his own foreboding grow to near-panic. The look, the tone of voice... The last time he'd seen that look, *the Commander had known in advance of a Cylon attack!*

He turned to the helmsman. "Plot a course, and stand by to use it. Missile launchers on stand-by. Pass the word to our pilots." He took another look at the cold determination on Theseus's face, a vision of something *else* in those bleak eyes. The coldness in the pit of his own stomach spread through his limbs. "And order immediate evacuation of all injured -- and anyone else who doesn't want to risk this."

The Bridge crew stared in astonishment at the last order, but Mandan set his jaw and returned to watching the scanners, waiting for the fateful order that somehow might make sense after all.

"Sir!" a voice broke into his thoughts. "We're picking up a base star... No, two base stars! Coordinates..."

"Feed them directly to the helm," Theseus ordered, coming out of his silent trance for a moment. "Helm, that's our goal. Get us to those base stars, then *through* them."

No one questioned him. His powerful, strident voice was awful. He might be a messiah, leading them to safety -- or a demon, taking them straight to Hades. Either way, they obeyed.

* * * * *

The battle was fast and furious, deadly to both human pilots and mechanical Cylons. Among the tylium asteroids, any missed shot could mean the explosion of several ships, friend and foe, or one's own destruction. The humans faced a severe test of courage, skill, and teamwork, against both the Cylons and the star system.

"Stay on course, Sheba! I've got 'em!" Bojay yelled.

Sheba heard the tension in her wingman's voice, but forced herself to fly steadily to preserve his targets. A micron later, and the flash of an exploding Raider nearly blinded her. He'd just saved her from a dangerous attack formation. A second Raider angled away from Bojay, and straight into her line of fire.

She touched her fire control, and the Cylon was pierced by a brilliant beam of laser fire. He tried to manoeuvre out of reach, and succeeded only in taking himself and a companion ship into an asteroid. She shielded her eyes from the flare.

"Thanks, Bojay." The action had taken only microns. After a few patrols, she and Bojay were starting to function as a competent team, but this fire-fight was no place to be testing themselves. She remembered there were other new flight teams aboard the PEGASUS, since the explosion...

Get your mind back on course!

She glanced quickly at her scanners, but the mass of targets told her little, and she knew eyeball-

ing would be more accurate in these circumstances, and would give her a better chance of surviving. She glanced around through the Viper canopy. There were flashes of laser fire, pieces of the infernal tylium rocks that so badly mangled communications and scanning, and an occasional fighter. That one distant blob might even be a battlestar, moving slowly against the star field. The other ships were scattered throughout the asteroid belt, each surrounded by contingents of fighters, both Cylon and human.

Some scratchy, garbled noises filtered through her com. She waited until the information, whatever it was, could be deciphered and passed along through some other pilot closer to its source.

"What in Hades does Theseus think he's doing?" a male voice suddenly demanded, aghast. "He's committing suicide!"

"What's he doing? What's going on?" Bojay demanded of the unidentified fighter pilot.

"He's evacuated personnel, gonna try blasting a path... He wants a Viper escort for shuttles..."

"Where?" Sheba queried sharply. They should make for the rendezvous point, run escort duty, if that's what Commander Theseus wanted. But -- blasting a path through *what*? The Cylons? The asteroids?

"Coordinates..." the other pilot began. "Dear Lords, they're not going to make it!"

"Make what? What's happening?"

This time, the flash of fire from the exploding ship, although much farther away, did blind the two PEGASUS pilots momentarily. They heard the other man cry out, "It's gone! The OLYMPUS! Oh, Kara..."

Then the stranger gasped once; they both heard his scream, and the wild screech of burning wires. His ship had been hit. The com went dead, and they saw a brief flare not far away. Then, nothing.

"That...that was the OLYMPUS?" Bojay repeated incredulously, horrified.

Sheba stared at the now-dark region of space where a battlestar had been. *Such a huge explosion...* She was stunned. "It must have been. Oh, Lords..." she whispered, then shook her head to clear it as much as possible. "Those shuttles must still be out there," she managed to say. "We'd better see if we can get closer, find out if they need help, or relay word to Father..."

She realized she was crying, but couldn't even risk reaching up to wipe away the tears. She blinked several times, swallowing hard. It did the trick; she regained control.

"Close in, Bojay. Let's see what we can do. Watch your tail in this mess."

"How 'bout if you watch my tail, and I watch yours?" he asked shakily, forcing the feeble humour.

"That's what wingmates are for." *Garnyd, much as I miss you, I'm glad you're not here...*

* * * * *

A young Cadet stared at the littered star field, at the flashing specks of metal that were fighters, at the constant flaring of lasers that destroyed those fighters, both Cylon and Colonial.

Astarte's hands were cold, and she was breathing in quick gasps. The calm she'd felt at the beginning of the battle had been false, she realized, and had quickly vanished. The momentary elation she'd felt at her first Cylon kill had also disappeared -- the first time she'd nearly taken a direct hit herself. Those few patrols, and Devon's suggestions -- they were no help now, not in the middle of this inferno. No one had prepared her for *this* at the Academy!

She was on the verge of hysteria, of giving up, of closing her eyes and waiting for the inevitable pursuer that would mean her death. She was shaking in her cockpit, unsure what to do next.

But she couldn't give up. That would mean surrender, defeat, letting the Cylons win. She had to at least *try* to fight...

Against these odds? After everything else she'd seen today?

Her wingman, a skilled, competent, experienced Warrior, had died in the first few centons of the fight, trying to block a Raider making a ramming run on one of the smaller ships in the Fleet. The

Raider had rammed *him* instead, and they'd gone up together, too close to a tylium asteroid that exploded from their wild laser shots. The OLYMPUS was gone, trying to plow a way through the mass of Raiders that had descended upon her like bees around a hive. Astarte would swear at least half of their Vipers were already destroyed, while the Cylon ships seemed endless, coming from nowhere...

But she couldn't just give up and die. That would be betrayal. She came from a Warrior family, and there'd been many heroes among them. She had a tradition to uphold, a heritage to be proud of. She had to prove Cain's faith in her was justified...

She tried to take aim on a Raider; it eluded her. Then -- thank the Lords! -- it disintegrated in somebody else's fire.

The asteroids made it difficult. She couldn't tell where Raiders might be hiding, and the asteroids were like a mine field, laced as they were with raw tylium, just waiting to explode. With her wingman gone, she had to keep an eye on her rear scanners, along with everything else; she simply couldn't see what was behind her, and there was nobody else to watch for her...

Cylons! There were Cylons behind her! And above her, and coming from ahead...! *A pinwheel!* She recognized the deadly formation now. What could she do? They were *everywhere!*

I can't get away from them...!

"No!" she shrieked aloud. "You can't! It's not fair! I haven't had time... I don't know how..."

She tried to twist away. Her Viper responded so slowly... *Maybe I can scare one of the Raiders into giving way for me... But, no, I forgot, Cylons don't scare... Is this it, then?*

"Keep rolling!" a voice shouted in her ear. She obeyed without thought; that voice was accustomed to command.

Laser fire was everywhere, some of it very close to her ship. Astarte caught her breath again. The Raiders were dispersing, several of them drifting away in shrapnel clouds.

"Thank...thank you," she stuttered into her communicator. *I'm still alive...!*

"Captain Orestes, BRITANNICA. Who're you? Don't you know enough to watch out for that formation?" The voice was irate, and with reason. It was an elementary trap; she simply hadn't been watching.

"Cadet Astarte, PEGASUS," she replied meekly. She was still too shaken to put any pride or belligerence into her voice, or to defend her actions.

"Cadet...?" Oh, *her*. "Yeah, okay, that explains it. I guess this is hardly the place to be learning Cylon methods, but you don't have much choice, do you?"

"My wingman...went early... I've been alone. Can I fly with you?" she asked. She hoped they wouldn't mind a third wingmate, even if she *was* from another battlestar, and only a cadet. She was frightened. She never considered that the Captain's wingmate might be dead as well.

"I could use someone. Electra took some damage, headed in awhile ago. Take position, and let's get back to the fight." The business-like tone of his voice, the faith in his own skills, and his acceptance of her as a partner all helped restore some confidence to Astarte; her hands stopped shaking. She was flying with a Captain who knew what he was doing.

She took a deep breath and even managed a smile as she answered him. "I'm with you. Let's go." She dropped her Viper into second-ship position, and they flew back through the asteroids, back into the battle.

* * * * *

Captain Leif managed to pull his wounded ship away from the OLYMPUS when Commander Theseus sent out the evacuation order. His expression was one of cold fury as he fought the unresponsive controls, trying to locate and reach another ship while he was still in one piece. His Viper needed repairs; he was almost out of fuel; and his laser generator was exhausted. He was a sitting target for anyone who cared to take a shot at him.

Damn those Cylons for their treacherous ways! And damn Theseus, too, for taking the battlestar on a suicide run against two base stars and an asteroid belt full of tylium!

Where in Hades has Trent gone to? Probably gotten himself killed, just like everybody else seems to



jan
hanke-woods © 83

be doing...

"Frak!" He stared at his scanner. The forward screen was out, and he had to watch where he was going, but rear scan still functioned -- marginally. It now showed approaching Cylons.

"Anybody out there? Pilot in trouble, requesting assistance," he said into the com, wondering if that particular piece of equipment still worked, if anybody would hear his call, if they could free themselves from battle long enough to come and help him. *Not likely.* The odds were long against him.

A moment later, laser fire lanced through his ship, and still more systems threw sparks at him as they screamed into overload. Everything went dead on the unfortunate Warrior, and his ship shuddered off the course he'd won with such difficulty. His head slammed against the side of his canopy, and he'd have sworn both his helmet and his head split wide open.

The wooziness passed in a micron, and became nothing more than excruciating pain. His temper flare-up of a moment before had vanished as well. Precise fingers raced over controls and circuits, but nothing responded to manual efforts or inventive invective. The ship was dead in space, drifting without destination.

A shadow crossed his vision; he stared through the canopy. He was drifting toward one of the explosive rocks that littered this sector.

Damn! Where in Hades is that Cylon, now that I want one? No Warrior wanted to watch death approach while waiting helplessly.

Leif took a deep breath, staring in fascination at the looming object that grew larger by the micron as it pulled him closer, its minute gravity easily luring the tiny, crippled Viper like some terrible siren's song.

Electra, you were one damned beautiful witch. Too bad...

Yet another explosion lit the darkness.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Rissian didn't have time to look back at the expanding cloud that had once been his base ship. The shuttle he piloted rode the edge of the explosion; avoiding shrapnel, rock, and enemy fighters took all his concentration. The small craft had been damaged, and a shuttle full of injured crew members and pilots carried a precious cargo, especially when so many of them were friends of his. He had to get the ship safely out of the combat area and to the pre-arranged rendezvous point...

His co-pilot was having trouble reading the scanners and keeping the engines running smoothly and evenly. His head was bandaged, and his vision was filled with strange sparks and motes. Lieutenant Gavain had suffered a head injury in the crash-landing of his Viper, and really shouldn't have been flying; but as the doctor'd said, Gavain was one of the few conscious people aboard the shuttle who was physically capable and trained to fly such a ship. He and Rissian were also a team -- a definite advantage in this situation.

He wasn't sure, however, just how long he could remain conscious.

"Hold on, Gav. I need you here," Rissian murmured, seeing his wingman's head sag for a moment.

"Sorry," Gavain mumbled, stealing a quick glance back at the doctor. "Damn it, Ris, my head's goin' crazy." His deep voice was unsteady, barely audible even to his friend.

"Gotta hold on, Gav, just a little longer. Somebody's gotta keep an eye on that starboard engine, and the scanners are goin' out. I can't do everything."

"I know. I'll try, buddy." The OLYMPUS was gone, and it looked like most of the Fleet was, too. In those last centons, with the young doctor running around bawling orders no one listened to, while Rissian revved up the shuttle, Gavain had bumped his already-injured head as he and another pilot -- who'd been bleeding himself -- dragged several crew members to the escape craft. It seemed the fires of the burning ship still danced mockingly, teasingly before him, and shaking his head didn't help to clear it. As it was, Rissian was carrying the brunt of their burden -- flying the shuttle, steering clear of the shifting debris and enemy ships outside, worrying about him and the rest of their human cargo. *If I can just clear my head a little, make the fog go away...*

"Gavain!" Rissian yelled as his wingman slumped over and dropped to the deck. "Doc! Anybody! I need help up here!"

The starboard engine began to whine, a warning that called for immediate attention, and Rissian didn't have time to heed anything but his instruments for several centons. The next thing he noticed was another man sliding into the seat Gavain had somehow been dragged away from.

He spared a micron to glance at his new co-pilot. "Hey, Trent, try not to bleed all over everything, okay? You look like you shouldn't be moving, let alone flying," he commented shakily, trying to get his mind off his wounded friends.

Trent looked nearly as bad as Gavain. The young Sergeant had helped lug people aboard, then promptly collapsed into a seat on take-off. His hand was well-bandaged, but blood was still seeping through both his shirt and the wrappings of a chest wound of some kind. The doctor hadn't had time to examine the man thoroughly, with all the other injuries aboard.

The dark-haired kid grimaced. "Right. I'll keep an eye on those engines."

A com frequency buzzed quietly but insistently in the plug in Rissian's ear. He tuned it in. "We read you, Patrol Two. Identify, and state your business." He was brusquer than he meant to be, but he was too tired, too concerned with craft and cargo, to care if he hurt someone's feelings.

"Lieutenant Sheba and Lieutenant Bojay, from the PEGASUS. We'll block for you back to our base; that way, you won't have to detour to the rendezvous point, which, for all we know, the Cylons may already be aware of anyway. Get aboard the PEGASUS, and your people can be cared for sooner, too."

The two men aboard the damaged shuttle exchanged glances. Rissian was wary; Trent forced a weak, exhausted smile. "We didn't call for an escort," Rissian said suspiciously. He didn't trust anything in this battle.

"Your Commander did, before he went for glory with the OLYMPUS."

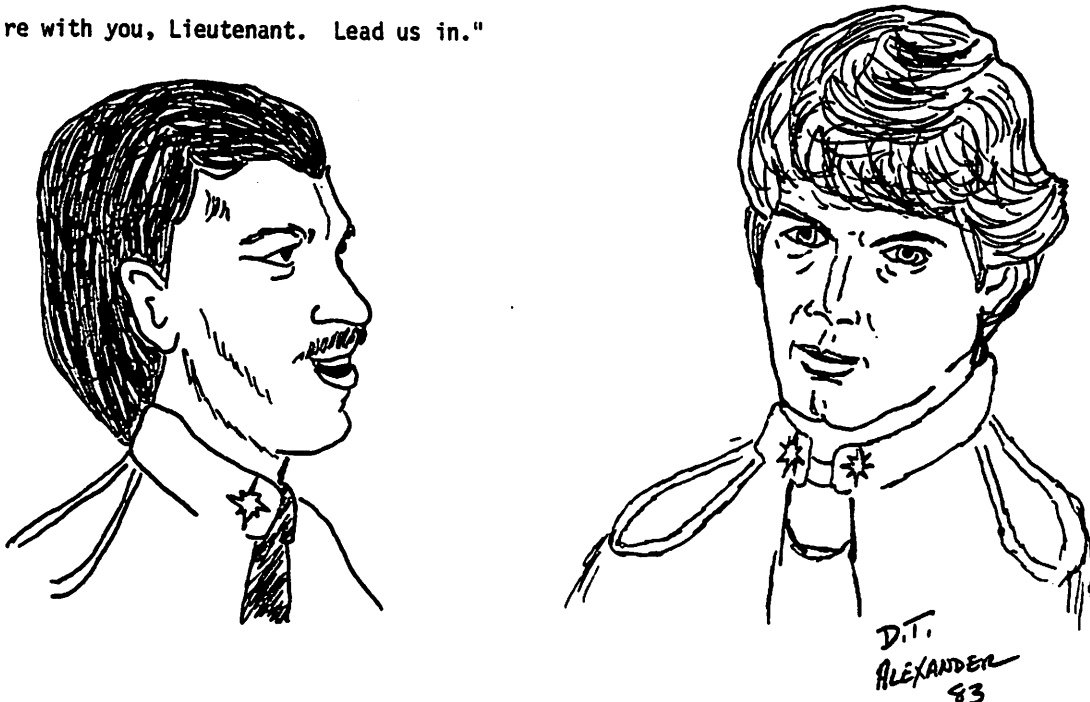
The OLYMPUS is really gone, then. Commander Theseus, the squadrons, most of the Fifth Fleet... At least the PEGASUS is still there, for now -- if the lady knows what she's talking about...

Looking around, Rissian thought the fire-fight was easing up a bit in their vicinity. *Is there a chance we'll actually get out of this mess alive?* He hesitated.

"I know the lady, Rissian. It's on the level... Be glad she's here. They're both good pilots..." Trent said quietly. His head was nodding, just like Gavain before he passed out.

Rissian made up his mind. If Trent knew her, that satisfied him; this wasn't some kind of new Cylon trap. Besides, the Cylons didn't have a reputation for taking prisoners. Add the fact that their scanners suddenly frizzled completely into static, and the lady's arrival was timely indeed -- the shuttle would have to navigate by her instructions.

"We're with you, Lieutenant. Lead us in."



VII

"All squadrons engaging Cylons," Tolan reported crisply. "Raiders closing on us; laser turrets reporting acquisition of targets."

Cain watched alertly, his mouth drawn into a lopsided grimace. For once, his riding crop lay motionless on a console. All of his attention was bound up in the combat surrounding his battlestar. He appeared as calm and controlled as if this were just another training exercise, with the outcome never in doubt; but his eyes said otherwise.

Tolan took another look at his Commander, and felt his own anxiety ease. He returned to his duties.

The PEGASUS had safely navigated the worst of the asteroid field, and was now well within range of the battle. Cylon fighters instantly peeled off to attack the new foe. The squadrons Cain had reserved for his ship's defence hurtled into combat, fresh and eager. Silver Spar and Copper Keel were already in action; their presence had been most welcome to the other Colonials. Now, Brass Strake and Bronze Wing helped turn the tables as the outflown Cylons were beaten back from the PEGASUS, back into the dangerous tylium-laced asteroid field. The arrival of a third battlestar hadn't been in time to save the OLYMPUS -- scanners aboard the flagship barely registered her destruction; Viper reports confirmed it -- but perhaps they could still win the battle and save what was left of the battered and beleaguered Fifth Fleet.

Tolan monitored the action, coordinating the activities of the Bridge crew and reporting everything to Commander Cain, who noted and acknowledged it all, his hawk-like steel-grey eyes still concentrated on the screens that showed the positions of ships and asteroids, as if his own will could prevent disaster. Kleopatra served as his back-up, checking and double-checking reports, keeping an extra eye on Memnon, the Launch Officer, as he monitored the Vipers coming in for refueling, rearming, and relaunching. There was little manoeuvring to be done, save for drawing nearer to the besieged Fleet, and that was Senmut's business. He did it well.

There was no trace of the BRITANNICA, although Cain knew she must be somewhere amidst the shifting turmoil of combat and natural hazards. Scanners continued to be of limited use, and communications were still badly garbled by Cylon jamming, but the PEGASUS was very much aware that most of the Fleet had already been destroyed. Over half the smaller ships were confirmed as lost, and several others were unaccounted for.

Kleopatra glanced at Cain as a series of communiques verified yet another evacuation ship as a casualty. His mouth tightened for a moment, and she could sense a micron's rage before the emotion was banished, set aside for more constructive action.

Reports also told of the battle's devastating cost to the Cylons. The Colonials exacted a heavy toll. If the Cylons won, this would be no victory to boast of. Even the Imperious Leader might wince; many such "victories" would drain even the mechanical Cylons beyond their available resources.

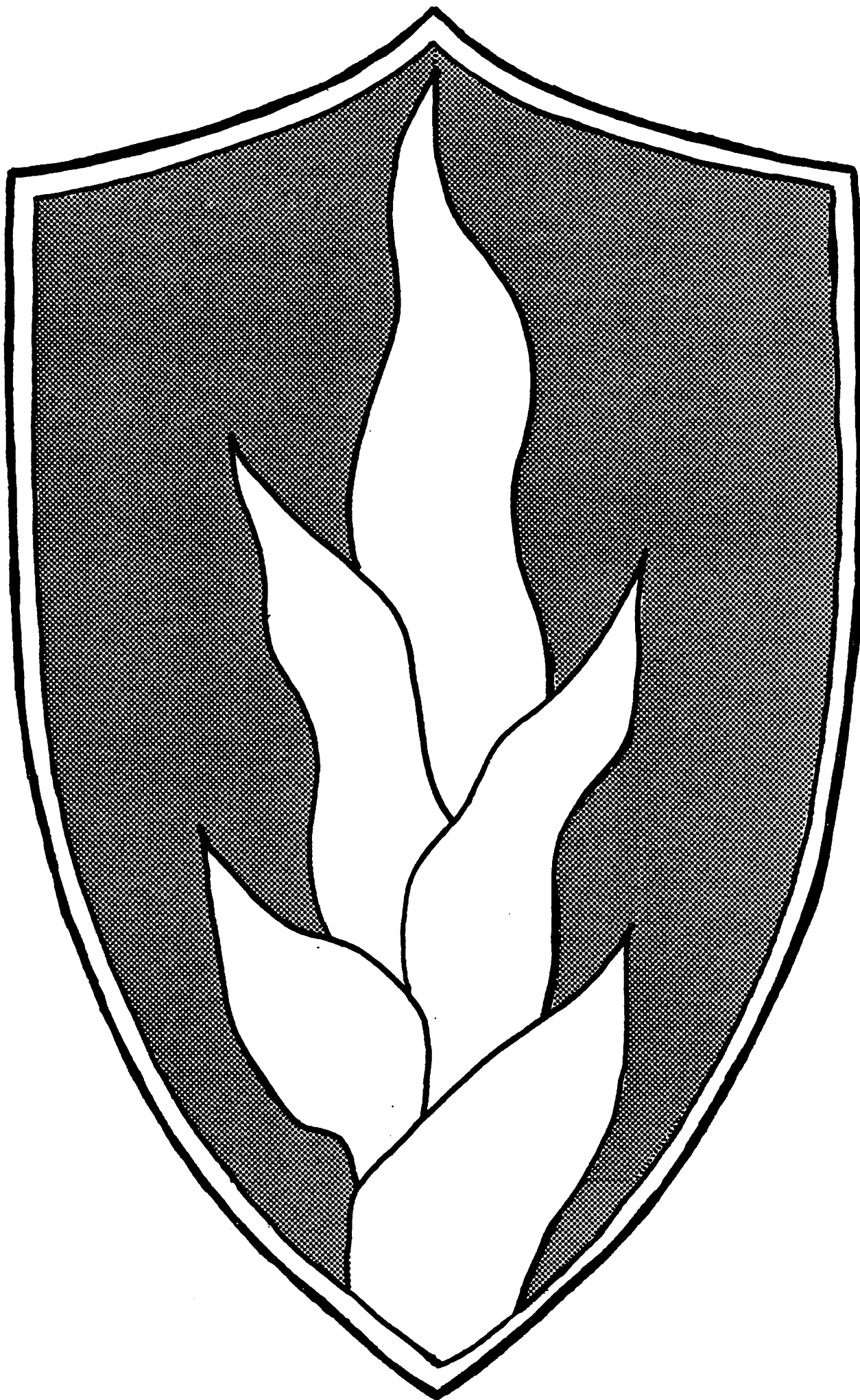
Three base stars were spotted at various times during the battle. When the OLYMPUS tried to blast her path through the combat area, two of those base stars had tried to block her. She took one of them to perdition with her in the initial explosion, and the expanding ring of percussive explosions in the tylium field so severely damaged the other that it quickly fell prey to the surviving horde of OLYMPUS Vipers -- although many of those Warriors also perished in their maddened quest for vengeance.

Still, that left at least one base star -- and numerous Raiders -- engaged in combat with the Colonial Vipers. Cain knew the best he could do for now was continue to clean out Cylons before they decided to turn and run; to pick up survivors; to search for other scattered remnants of his battered Fifth Fleet.

"Sir!"

"What is it, Tolan?"

"If our scanners can be trusted, there're two more squadrons of Raiders coming in."



Cain grunted in grudging respect for the Cylon commander who saved his fighters in order to throw them into the fray at a later, more crucial time. "Warn our Vipers."

Yes, the Cylon leader was cunning, more so than most he'd encountered in his long career. The battle was far from over.

* * * * *

"You're set, Major -- everything reads positive," said the voice in her ear.

Major Electra made a last check of her repaired instrumentation before responding. "Ready to go. Thanks, Edric. I'm off." Core Control cleared her, and her Viper hurtled down the launch tube to open space.

She was just in time. A burst of laser fire struck the BRITANNICA just to her left, and she saw her launch tube suddenly flare as its field was breached; flames ran the length of the tube, reaching for the heart of the bay. A moment more, and the blaze darkened as automatic sensors detected the fire and kicked into action to snuff it. Electra knew the shot had been aimed at her, in her Viper's most vulnerable moment, and she quickly looped away from a possible second shot.

"Too slow, metal-mouth," she muttered. "If you'd been a micron quicker, you'd've bagged yourself a Major. Too bad -- for you." She coolly sighted on the retreating Raider, following it. A laser flare, and the enemy disappeared into dispersing metal shards.

That's one Cylon who won't be taking any more pot-shots at us...

She glanced around quickly before deciding on her next course of action.

"Major Electra!" It was Core Command.

"Here, Marla."

"Join the convoy at Alpha Bay, Major. We're evacuating."

"What?" she demanded in disbelief. The ship couldn't be hurt *that* badly -- could it?

"The Bridge has been hit," another voice replied. "We're removing to the secondary computer centre, and evacuating all the wounded and all unnecessary personnel. Get them safely away, Major. You're serving escort duty."

"Yes, Commander," she replied, swallowing hard. With the Bridge damaged, obviously seriously, the BRITANNICA's chances of surviving this battle were considerably lessened.

Electra banked her small fighter to pass above the battlestar, heading for Alpha Bay, where the convoy had already formed. She saw a miniature fleet of shuttles already in space, surrounded by a score of Vipers; they were holding off a wave of Cylon attackers, and were already on the move.

"Major?" It was a familiar voice, from one of those Vipers.

"Here, Amun. I'll take charge."

"The Commander informed us."

"Heard from Orestes recently?"

"No. Should I have?" the Lieutenant asked.

"I suppose not. I don't know where he headed after I got hit. Thought maybe he'd still be around." She dropped into something resembling a formation alongside Amun's ship. She'd expected her brother to wait for her to rejoin him, but realized that in the midst of all the fighting, he'd be needed elsewhere -- probably *everywhere*.

"I haven't heard anything about him in maybe a centar," Amun continued. "He's probably in the middle of everything, like always."

"Yes, probably. What're the evac coordinates?" If Orestes was in the fight, Electra felt she belonged there, too. A nagging worry that she was abandoning her brother as well as her battlestar was little comforted by the fact that she was under orders.

They were abandoning the BRITANNICA. The OLYMPUS was already gone. The small evacuation ships didn't have a chance. *Heaven and the Lords help us all if the PEGASUS doesn't get here soon...*

* * * * *

Commander Cain was doing his best to get the PEGASUS there soon. But his ship was in the midst of an attack by the second major wave of Raiders. He had long ago kicked out his grudging respect for his enemy counterpart, preferring the curses he liberally mouthed to himself as he listened to reports coming in from all sections. His ship was taking a severe beating.

"Where in Hades is Bronze Wing?" he demanded angrily of the young officer at the com station.

"They're regrouping, sir. Several fighters are already engaging the enemy."

Cain had sent half his squadrons ahead to relieve the pressure on the Fifth Fleet, throwing the rest into combat as his battlestar drew near the asteroid field. As a result, his rear flank was unprotected. He wasn't caught completely unawares -- he was *never* unprepared for battle -- but the attacking phalanx had a brief advantage, and they were making the most of it. He'd recalled one squadron, but most of the Vipers hadn't yet pulled back from the fight to defend their base.

Alert sirens, already sounding all over the ship, suddenly screamed an octave higher. Bridge personnel glanced nervously toward their Commander as the entire ship seemed to shudder around them.

"Hit amidships! Considerable damage, casualties, some compartments breached. Fire and Damage Control moving in. Solenite stable, no reports of fire. Expected under control within the center..."

"Keep me informed!" Cain barked. "And tell our fighters to keep those Cylons away from the weak spot! Heimdal, where in Hades are you?"

He hoped the answer wasn't...*Hades*.

* * * * *

"Merciful Lords, the BRITANNICA's on fire!" Orestes gasped in dismay.

"The whole Fleet looks like it's on fire," the Cadet flying beside him commented shakily.

The OLYMPUS was gone, trying to forge a passage through a corridor of Cylon ships. Most of the smaller warships and evacuation ships they could locate had sustained heavy damage. But to see his *own* home ship on fire, beyond salvage and perhaps only moments from destruction, was a great shock to the young Captain. The battlestar had been his home for years; the crew was his family. Now, it was burning. He saw shuttles fleeing from the launch bays, escorted by Vipers somehow spared from the combat around them.

So it was as bad as all that. Commander Hera had given up, was trying to save whatever of her crew she could, using her ship as a flaming shield to hide her fleeing people. The shuttles would rendezvous at previously chosen coordinates, and those ships that remained would pick up the survivors after the battle.

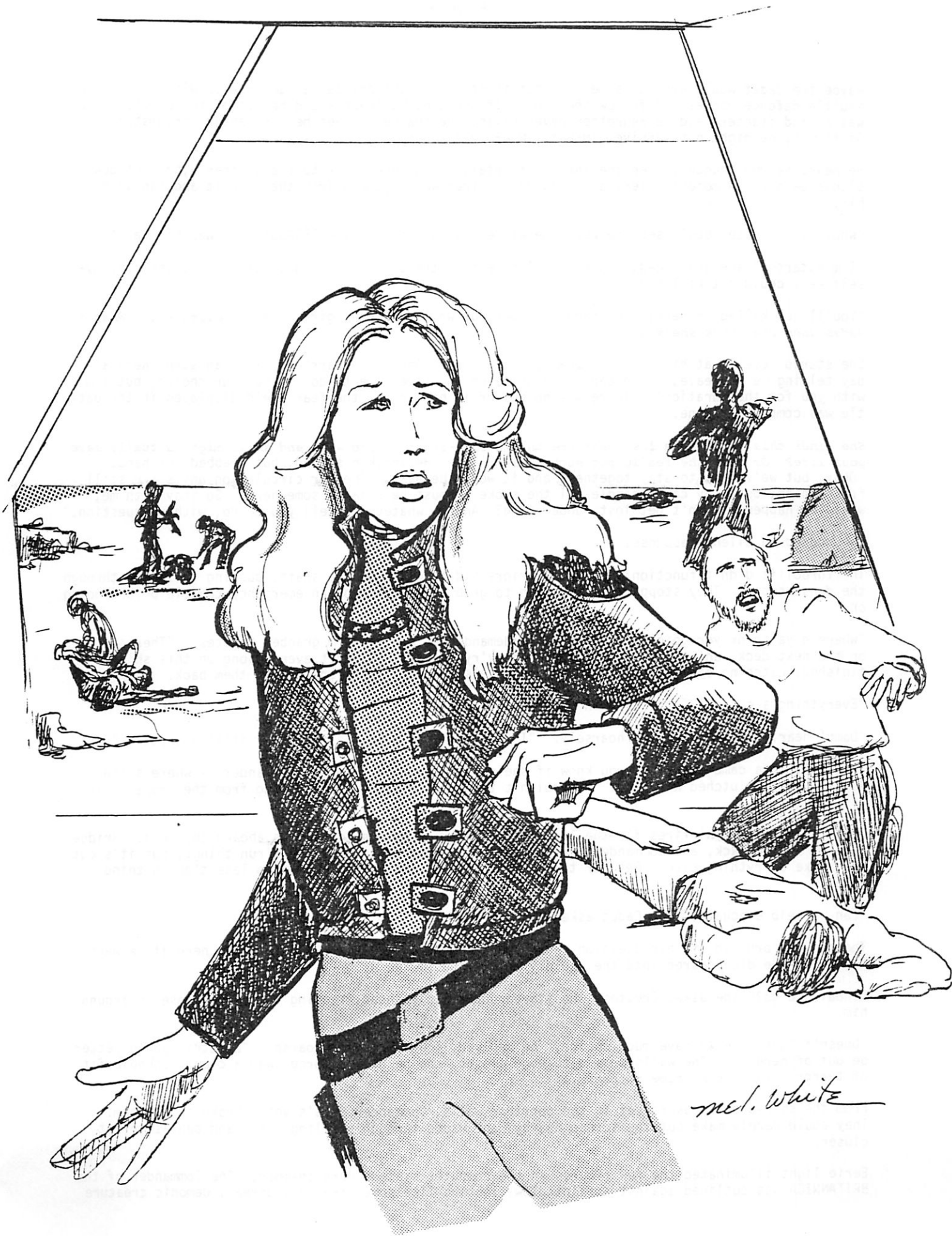
The battlestar was in bad shape, and couldn't hold out much longer. Orestes swallowed hard. Electra had returned to the BRITANNICA to refuel, rearm, and repair the damages that last Cylon had inflicted on her Viper. She might still be aboard; he had to check. His sister... If he just stood by and let her die... His mind and guts refused to consider it.

"Stay here, Cadet. Defend the ship, if you can. Run, if you want to. I have to land, check on..."

"Let's go," Astarte replied with as much calm as she could muster.

"No!" Orestes declared firmly. "Stay here. That ship's going to blow before long, and believe it or not, you're safer out here. 'Bye, Cadet. Take care, and I might even see you again." With no more words, he took his Viper in for a landing in the already-damaged landing bay. The launch area was completely gutted; he'd have to take off the same way he'd come in. He heard the young woman begin a protest, but he cut her off.

The deck was an inferno of flames, metal debris, and vague screams -- whether human or otherwise, he didn't know, and doubted he had the time to learn. He set his fighter down as near the end of the bay as he dared. There was a turbolift close by, leading to the main ship control chambers. If Electra wasn't in the bay, she'd be on the Bridge. He prayed she hadn't landed in time to have her ship sent to the launch tubes. If she'd been *there*, she was dead.



Maybe the Cadet would even do some good out there. Her best chance was to hook up with one of the shuttle defence cadres and follow them out. If she did, at least she'd be out of the battle. She was a good fighter, and he regretted never having the chance to meet her in better circumstances. As it was, he might not survive himself. *Where was Electra?*

He heard nearby thunder, then the shriek of metal, and glanced back to see another Viper set down alongside his. A moment later, a lithe, dark-haired woman jumped from the cockpit and ran after him.

"Who...?" Orestes could see she wore the winged-sword patch of the PEGASUS. It was his Cadet.

"I'm Astarte," she announced, coughing a little from the smoke. "I'm not staying out there by myself -- I could get killed!"

"You'll get killed in here!" he snapped. "Get out while you can, girl." *The foolish kid! What in Hades does she think she's doing?*

She stared levelly at him. "I'm a woman, not a girl. And I'm a Warrior. You can stand here all day telling me to leave, or we can go do whatever you came here to do. Take your choice, but I'm with you for the duration!" There was no quaver in her voice; the fear she'd displayed in the battle was completely gone.

She finds this Hades-hole less fearsome than a fire-fight, where wits and skill might actually save your life? Or does she really put such trust in me? He shook his head, but grabbed her hand. "Okay, but we've got to stay together, and it won't be easy. The air circulation units are still functioning, but they can't handle all the smoke -- must be damaged somewhere. So stay with me, whatever happens. Don't get lost, understand? And do whatever I tell you to do, without question."

She nodded in silent response.

The turbolift didn't function; the two Warriors had to climb up the shaft, pushing their way through the dense smoke. They stopped for a micron to grab air masks from an emergency cubicle before going on.

"Where d'ya think yer goin'?" a husky voice demanded as a burly arm grabbed Orestes. "There's fire on the next deck, an' the Ol' Lady's ordered ev'rybody out! Y'don't even belong on this ship!" he finished, catching sight of the patch on Astarte's sleeve. He tried to push them back.

"Everything's cut off?" the Captain demanded, aghast.

"Damn' near!" the man replied hoarsely. "I'm gettin' off m'self, if there's still a shuttle."

"But...Electra came back. Do you know if she's still aboard? And the Commander -- where's she?" Astarte still clutched his hand. He couldn't tell if his eyes were watering from the smoke or from his own fear.

"Look, I bin fightin' fires f'r the last few centars. I got no idea who's aboard any more. Bridge took it awhile back, an' Commander Hera's bin at the comp centre, tryin' t'run things, but it's cut off, like ev'rything else. Get yer tails off this baby, if y'can! It's too late t'do anything else."

"Can we help evacuate?" the Cadet asked.

The big man brushed off her question -- and her. "I told ya, it's cut off. Stay here if ya want t'die..." He disappeared into the rapidly thickening smoke.

"Should we go?" she asked Orestes, who stared uncertainly ahead, feeling the smoke close in around him.

"Doesn't look like we have much choice," he replied, low-voiced and hoarse. "Electra, you'd better be out of here..." The walls seemed to edge closer, and he had to force away a claustrophobic fit of terror. *This is no time to panic...*

From the ship-wide speakers set in the corridor walls, Commander Hera's voice broke in on them. They could barely make out the screen nearby, and waded through swirling smoke and debris to get closer.

Eerie light illuminated the few figures in the computer systems core chamber. The Commander of the BRITANNICA was outlined against a faint glow, looking like some strangely unreal, demonic creature

-- a witch controlling sorcerous flame. A few people tried vainly to smother the fires with small emergency canisters.

"...repeat, this is the final order to evacuate. Take whatever shuttles and Vipers remain, and abandon ship. Most sections are cut off. Evacuate immediately."

Just as she finished speaking, another console exploded, sending sparks and shrapnel flying across the room. Orestes and Astarte saw glowing debris strike the deceptively frail-looking woman, and her hair and uniform ignited as she staggered back.

"No!" Orestes screamed. Astarte caught her breath in horror.

Hera cried out once, and raised one hand to beat at the fiery halo of her hair. A man Orestes didn't recognize threw himself at her with a shout, using his jacket to try to smother the rising flames. Then another explosion rocked the ship. A sudden gale through the computer centre indicated the ship's hull had ruptured at that point; the room was opening to space.

The screen went dark as Orestes clutched futilely at the unyielding wall. "No," he whispered, staring at the empty screen, pounding at it as if demanding it return to life and rescind its previous horrible message.

Astarte gripped his arm more tightly. "Captain? We'd better go..." she said nervously, her fears returning at this unwelcome reminder of their mortality.

He turned to face her, and she saw tears streaking his soot-stained face. "Yeah, you're right." He pushed back the hair that had fallen into his eyes, then pointed down the corridor. "Let's go, and hope the deck hasn't collapsed anywhere, and the grav units don't go out on us..."

They dashed through the billowing smoke and ash, reaching the lift shaft before the murk became too thick to see through, grateful for the air masks they'd grabbed earlier.

"Careful going down," Orestes advised. "Try not to fall; it's a long way, and I'm beneath you."

At the bottom of the shaft, Astarte stumbled. The Captain caught her arm and tried to pull her along. "No!" she insisted, refusing to leave. "There's somebody here!" Her probing hands discovered what she'd tripped over, and he knelt beside her to check the body himself.

"I can take her in my Viper..."

"Forget it," he said dully, rising to his feet again. "She's dead. Let's go."

As if burnt, Astarte pulled her hand away from the corpse. The two Warriors sprinted across the deck to where they'd left their Vipers. It was hard to see; the smoke wasn't as thick, but the overhead lights were out. Still, Orestes knew where they'd left their fighters; he'd chosen an easily located landing beacon as a marker.

But something was wrong. Their ships weren't there.

"What could've happened?" Astarte demanded shrilly, her panic rising.

"Obviously, somebody needed a way off the ship," he replied bitterly. "So they took ours. Unfortunately, that leaves us stranded."

She screamed, her courage suddenly gone. Orestes slapped her -- hard -- before she became completely hysterical. His own fears made the slap vicious; she staggered, but somehow kept her feet.

"Hey!" they heard somebody yell, as a figure became dimly visible in the half-light of the billowing smoke. "Who's there? Who screamed?"

"Who's there?" Orestes shouted in return. "Our ships... Somebody stole our Vipers!"

"Those were yours? The doc ordered 'em out -- we had a couple of pilots who could still fly, and the shuttle needs protection. Come on, before I choke to death out here! We're the last, and we've got to get out before it's too late..."

The man didn't need to say more. Orestes and Astarte headed toward his voice even as he began to speak. Somehow in the swirling gloom, they located the shuttle, not far from where they'd left their own ships.

"We got 'em! Go!" the man shouted to the pilot as they all stumbled aboard. The hatch cycled shut behind them, and the shuttle was moving before they could leave the entry area. They staggered into the passenger compartment, where Orestes and Astarte grabbed handholds; all the seats were occupied, and people were sitting in the aisles. The man who'd called to them continued through to the pilots' section.

"We're safe?" Astarte asked moments later, as the shuttle cleared the landing bay. There was a red-denying welt on her cheek.

Orestes stared out a port. "We've got to clear the explosion area," he replied wearily. "We don't want to get hit by anything when she explodes... But explosive decompression's a lot quicker than smoke inhalation, and less painful than fire..." He couldn't look at her; his eyes were filled with horrible visions of his sister, his Commander, and all the others who might die or who had already died on this terrible day.

"Where do we go now?" the Cadet asked timidly.

"Rendezvous point. If anything survives this, they'll go there looking for us. And we can't even fly, or defend ourselves... At least, it looks like the Cylons've pulled back. They must know it'd be a waste of ships and fire-power to keep attacking the BRITANNICA now..."

The blackness around them burst into the brilliant fury of a miniature star. Fiery fragments of metal flew outward in all directions as the battlestar died. The intense light blinded the observers aboard the shuttle -- and fortuitously hid the helpless craft from the Cylons. The battlestar BRITANNICA was gone.

The shuttle continued its flight, dodging dangerous tylium asteroids, completely hidden from enemy scanners as it ran for any possibility of safety.



VIII

The OLYMPUS was gone, destroyed, but her shuttle survived to reach the safety of the PEGASUS, under the protection of two PEGASUS pilots. He was glad of that. He knew the Cylons wouldn't be overly disturbed if he died with the rest, but he wanted to be around to spend the liberal "reward" Count Baltar had promised in return for his little services.

The job on the OLYMPUS had been done well, although the bombs were discovered too soon; still, they'd been a distraction. A little more such work here aboard the PEGASUS, and he could vanish completely, to reappear at some future time. Baltar had, after all, assured him of a welcome with the Cylon assault forces presently demolishing the Fifth Fleet.

In the chaos around him, he was able to slip away unnoticed.

* * * * *

"Sir?"

"Yes, Tolan?" the Commander growled. The high level of tension during the past centars had taken a toll on all of them. Even the Commander was near his limit, nervously tapping his ever-present riding crop; Tolan began flinching every time it cracked against the railing. The crazy notion that the whip would soon strike his back obsessed him, returning to nibble its way into conscious thought despite his best efforts to ignore it.

"Captain Heimdal reports the Cylons appear to be running. He's requesting instructions."

"Get our pilots together. Have them regroup and rendezvous with us. Do we have any word on the BRITANNICA? We have to reassemble the Fleet before the Cylons can renew their attack..."

"Commander?" Memnon interrupted. "Word from the VENTURE, sir. She's making for us, and requests Viper assistance to hold off an attack wave."

"Inform Heimdal. But keep one squadron with us. What about the BRITANNICA? VENTURE was with her."

The Communications Officer turned away. "According to her commander," he replied, his voice low, "the BRITANNICA was destroyed not long ago. They think they're the only ship left."

"My God," Cain murmured into the shocked silence. "As bad as that? Tell Heimdal to hurry, and start picking up every survivor we encounter. We may have to move fast."

"Lieutenants Sheba and Bojay escorted a shuttle aboard half a centar ago," Tolan advised. "A convoy under Major Electra, from the BRITANNICA, is landing in Beta Bay right now. And we're receiving signals from two or three other shuttles or shuttle convoys. They're rendezvousing at our coordinates as soon as they can get here."

"Good. We stay here, then -- for now."

"Sir?" It was Memnon again. "Another shuttle requesting assistance. They report they were damaged escaping Cylons..."

"Get their location, and send Vipers, if we've any to spare. Kleopatra, looks like we're clear for the moment. Communications reported they deciphered the Hsarri tape, and I want to know what it says. Take charge here, and let me know if anything comes up."

"You know I will, sir." The Commander was already on his way out the door, off the Bridge.

All ships destroyed but one, he thought grimly as he strode along the corridors of his vessel. Only VENTURE survives -- one lone exception to the carnage. Two battlestars, a dozen other ships, all blasted to pieces in a Cylon trap. How could it have happened? How did the Cylons know about our presumably secret mission? Who informed them of our route? And what of Molukai? What's happening on that lonely world? Are the Cylons waiting there, as well?

There were too many questions, and not enough answers. Maybe the Hsarri tape would give him some

data, and offer suggestions for his next course of action.

* * * * *

The PEGASUS landing bay was a scene of utter confusion. Vipers landing to be refueled and rearmed were shunted aside as rapidly as possible, seen to by Viper technicians, and moved to waiting launch cradles. Shuttles were unloaded and the wounded were tended by emergency medics. The crashed remains of several Vipers and a single severely damaged shuttle lay together in an out-of-the-way corner, as if trying to hide from the confusion.

Electra shuddered as she stared at the pile of smashed metal. She'd brought her Viper in for its usual perfect landing; Edric's repairs were solid. Amun had landed carefully next to her, and both their ships were removed from the scene. The shuttle they'd escorted was off to one side, near the emergency screen; medical personnel were examining the injured survivors, sending the most serious cases to Life Centre, tending minor scrapes and broken bones whenever they had the time.

But the ruined tangle of ships in the corner was a reminder to all of them that not everybody would survive. Mangled bodies could be removed and hidden away -- but the ships were a mute testimony to the fact that the best doctors in space couldn't save a pilot whose ship or skills failed too soon.

Electra turned away, taking a deep breath, thinking of her brother, wishing she knew for certain where he was -- or even if he was still alive.

"Med tech!" she called, catching the sleeve of a passing nurse, a woman with long, dark, curly hair. "Have you seen or heard anything of a Captain Orestes, from the BRITANNICA? I lost contact with him; I don't know what happened to him."

The woman glanced at her, dark eyes seeking the reason for the question; she reached her own conclusions, and her expression became compassionate. "I'm sorry," she replied in a thick accent. "I have not seen anything of an Orestes. But try to be optimistic. Maybe he has not needed medical help." Galswintha hurried on to her next patient, a young technician who stared dazedly at nothing, holding his strangely angled, bloody arm close to his body.

"No," Electra murmured, "maybe not injured. I just pray he isn't dead!"

The beautiful blonde hurried along herself, briefly stopping in several places to lend a hand or offer sympathy, asking about her brother whenever she encountered acquaintances. But no one had seen him. In a few moments, her ship would be ready to launch again, and she would have to abandon her quest, and be thrown back into battle...

"You're from the BRITANNICA! Have you seen Captain Orestes? You know him..." she called out to a burly man waiting for a turbolift; she ran to catch him. "Sergeant, have you seen him?"

The big man stared at her, seeing the worry etched in her lovely features. He felt a pang as he remembered he'd seen the Captain and a companion. "I saw 'im," he replied briefly.

"Where? Was he all right?" she insisted anxiously.

"He...an' a friend...were on the BRITANNICA. I think they were lookin' f'r somebody, the Commander, prob'ly. They got upset when they found out the Ol' Lady was cut off. He didn't look happy, didn't sound like he wanted t'leave." The man refused to look at her; he turned back to the lift.

They'd been aboard the battlestar! Electra knew how her brother felt about Commander Hera, how he admired her, how he would cheerfully risk anything at her order. His respect for her was close to love. *Could he have gone back to try and save her?* She felt an icy chill in her heart; it raced along her veins and seemed to settle throughout her entire body.

She stared after the man. Her brother might be dead. "Wait!" she called, grabbing the railing. "Did they get out? Did you see them leave?"

"I dunno what happened to 'em," he called back as the lift rose. "They wouldn't come with me. The ship exploded a few centons later. I'm...sorry, Major." Even his feet disappeared up the shaft, as Electra clung numbly to the railing, swaying slightly.

"Major! Tech crew reports your Viper's ready for action!"

The dim voice penetrated the haze in her mind. The rushing winds within her private mental void subsided; pain and necessity returned. She went back to her duty.

* * * * *

Alone in his quarters, Cain listened in silence to the Hsarri recording -- at least, to the Colonial equivalent of it. Communications had done their best, but there were still phrases and words that defied translation, expressions so puzzling to Colonial ears that they obviously had different meanings and connotations in the Hsarri tongue.

The tale was tragic from the beginning.

The Homeship -- *alien equivalent of a base ship?* -- had been enroute to Molukai, where a few Hsarri ships still occasionally put in for such few items as they couldn't manufacture or obtain themselves, but must trade for. They'd passed near the Delphian quadrant. Usually, that people permitted them to pass without trouble, for though their religious and cultural beliefs were diametrically opposed, the scattered Hsarri survivors were no threat to Delphian ambitions.

This time, however, they'd encountered Cylons in Delphian territory -- an assault force of ominous size. From communications, they'd deduced that all-out warfare was in progress. Unwilling to become involved, unable to lend useful assistance, but concerned enough about the Cylon presence to be worried -- and no doubt recalling what the Cylons had done to their own home world over a millennium ago -- they'd fled to Molukai, only to learn that the lonely world and its solitary satellite were already in enemy hands. The Cylons had infested the sector, and the Hsarri retreated once again. Their aging ship and few Scouts -- *fighters of some kind? And what in Hades were Outriders?* -- were practically helpless against such a force.

Seeing how serious the situation really was, the Hsarri had made a difficult decision. The Mother -- *Commander?* -- had decided, in spite of some inadequately explained fears, to turn to the Twelve Worlds -- *for what? To warn? To seek help for themselves, or for Molukai?*

They never reached a Colonial outpost. They knew of the tylium belt, knew it was uninhabited, occasionally mined it themselves. Since no one else had bases in that sector, they thought it was safe. Instead, they had found a massed Cylon attack force, with three base stars.

The Homeship had been destroyed, faltering with the failure of the Mother -- *a peculiar term for defeat!* What few Scouts were left scattered helplessly, hopelessly, under fire from the better armed and more modern Raiders. A few Outriders -- *that term again!* What were they? -- had tried to buy escape time, having no hope for themselves. The Clan -- *crew? Family? Were "Clan" and crew the same?* -- had died, and from the woman's choice of words and the horror of her expression, she had been in contact with them up to their final moment.

A tragic thing, but something I and every other Commander should be familiar with. Why so pointed a mention of it? Ah, but Kleopatra said the woman was a mother; perhaps her children were what concerned her, not the ship itself...

Long periods of cold had passed -- *centars, maybe? What are the Hsarri time periods?* -- before the message was made and fed into the...*some unknown machine, probably a log buoy.* Then, they could only wait. The Warrior-Leader and Trainee -- *again, the apparently contradictory terms* -- had watched two more of her people die before she sealed the tape, sighing sadly. Her last chattering gust of breath was the final recorded sound on the tape.

Cain touched a switch, and the scratchy static of the tape was stilled. So that was what had happened to the Hsarri. A half-frozen, half-burnt woman left a message in the desperate hope that someone could make use of it. He felt a great respect for the last survivor of that ship, who'd endured so much and had ensured they would know what happened. He'd learned several things of value for his strategy, but what he'd learned only made him burn with a greater fury -- and with curiosity as well.

The attack had been planned. Not for a single Hsarri ship, he was sure, but for bigger game. Like perhaps an entire Colonial Fleet?

The Cylon presence was no accident. He wished he could talk to the Hsarri, but the woman was dead. *Well, if we survive, she'll at least have an honourable Warrior's grave among the stars. I owe her that much. And I'll remember her name -- Brimartis...*

A discreet chime from the communications console broke his mental tribute to the dead woman. He leaned toward the console, instantly alert. "Cain here." He half-expected to hear that the attack had been renewed, that his presence was immediately required on the Bridge.

Kleopatra's image formed on the screen. "Commander Ismenos of the VENTURE is aboard, sir. According to her own technicians, VENTURE is beyond any hope of repair. We've begun evacuating her per-



mel. white

sonnel; the Commander is supervising himself. I doubt we'll be able to drag him from the landing bay until the operation is complete."

"Fine," Cain replied. "I've still got some planning to do. Get me a read-out on the damage as soon as it's available. In the meantime, let Ismenos do his job. Keep me informed."

The image of the PEGASUS Executive Officer faded from the screen, and the Commander leaned on his desk, scowling. Not even VENTURE would come through this. It appeared the PEGASUS would be the sole survivor of the massacre -- if he could pull them through. The Cylon trap was well-planned, its job quite thoroughly done.

Damn them! He slammed his fist against the console, then rose and turned to the viewport, his riding crop for the moment abandoned on the desk.

As he stared through the port, he didn't really see what was there. His ship was safely hidden among the asteroids, concealed by the interference generated by the raw tylium in the rocks. It rankled, this need to hide while repairs were made and his battle-weary crew rested. The PEGASUS was safe for now, and they were pulling in survivors as fast as they found them; they'd inflicted heavy damage on the Cylons, too, before the enemy broke and ran, but the Fifth Fleet was utterly destroyed -- only that one small ship, only VENTURE, remained. She floated in space alongside the battlestar while her crew was evacuated.

Cain sighed as he turned and picked up his riding crop again. The OLYMPUS had taken one base star with her in her ill-fated attempt to blast free of the Cylon trap; a second had been destroyed almost immediately by avenging Colonial Vipers. There remained, therefore -- if Brimartis the Hsarrri was correct -- one Cylon base star, hidden, as they were, among tylium bombs the size of small planets -- and garbled scanners made probes nearly impossible. Soon, the tentative feeling-out manoeuvres would begin, as each ship assessed damages and began the game of tag that would result in loss for one or both of them.

He had no intention of being the one destroyed. A white fire burned within the core of his being, a familiar composite of emotions -- anger at the loss of his Fleet and of so many friends; hatred of the Cylons; a need for vengeance of some kind; the certainty they had been betrayed. *Someone* placed those bombs on his ships, and only the Cylons had the kind of resources that would enable them to prepare such a trap, in such strength.

Commander Theseus, dead. And Commander Hera. Cain had known both his subordinate commanders as friends. Although the Fleet seldom gathered in one place, and only rarely went on group manoeuvres, the three ranking officers had ample opportunity to meet, both socially and militarily.

He'd always known Hera better...

Almost everyone in the Colonies knew Hera. The woman was quietly brilliant, preferring to do her job without public fanfare, behind the headlines -- unlike himself. However, yahrens ago, Recruitment fastened on her as a sort of "poster girl," a recruiting example, the feminine ideal of the Colonial Warrior. Married to a Warrior (who later died in combat), mother of a lovely girl (currently becoming a fine Warrior in her own right), a heroine in every sense of the word, Hera was approached for an advertising campaign. She reluctantly accepted, and the entire Twelve Colonies watched and applauded as a young squadron leader rose through the ranks to command a battlestar, defeating Cylon foes and overcoming personal tragedy while raising a daughter -- whom she seldom saw, thanks to the demands of her public relations work. She became a sort of "superwoman" -- Warrior, wife, mother, heroine; she was everything they needed and wanted, and she did her best to live up to her assigned role.

Cain knew, though. He knew what her life did to her. She rarely saw her daughter, who nearly worshipped her. As her own career began to eclipse her husband's, it nearly tore their marriage apart; only his early death kept the fiction alive in the public eye. Now, the Warrior-heroine was dead as well, valiantly facing impossible odds with a traitor at her back. He knew what Public Relations would do with *that*.

He vowed to himself that he'd personally tell Hera's daughter of her mother's death; he owed the girl's mother that much, and more. The young Sergeant, currently on leave from command classes at the Caprican Academy, would be devastated, he knew. And she'd probably be the next poster girl, with her mother's "glorious" heritage a backing for all her other abilities.

He saw in Hera and Io what he was blind to in his own relationship with Sheba...

Theseus was a different sort of Warrior. A mediocre pilot for most of his career, he'd had glory thrust upon him when most men would have despaired of ever gaining elusive military fame. He was

making a routine check on a scientific base when the Cylons attacked. Most of the pilots aboard the visiting warship were killed, and the ship was damaged. Then the Cylons attacked the civilian scientists. In a series of moves displaying great tactical brilliance, Theseus lured the Cylons away long enough to evacuate the base. His star rose astoundingly after that; within a few years, the unknown Major had become a popular Commander, and he was given command of his own battlestar.

Cain knew him to be a man strangely driven, occasionally unsure of himself, but totally committed to his ship, dedicated to his cause, and involved in his job. Theseus never married; Cain believed a niece was his only family.

What possessed Theseus to take on two base stars with an already crippled ship of his own? Yet, as it was, he nearly succeeded...

Whatever had been in his mind, Cain wanted to figure it out. The bombs might have been the crucial element, the odd variable that meant failure. He had no idea if more tylium devices had been found aboard the OLYMPUS, or if any of them had exploded. There might even have been sabotage of some other, some unexpected sort. He might never know, unless one of the survivors could tell him.

Someone betrayed Theseus, betrayed both the OLYMPUS and the BRITANNICA...

And the PEGASUS, too -- but he had survived, thus far. The Cylons' saboteurs hadn't been completely successful...

But who...?

Baltar! Baltar betrayed us!

It has to be! He's the only one who had access to all three battlestars during those final days in port, Baltar, and his damned aide, Karibdis, the slimy, pest-ridden adaka! And only the Lords and Baltar know if there are any other conspirators aboard the ships of the Fleet...

Those bombs had cost lives. They'd been meant to cost more, to better the odds for the Cylons, to disrupt the inner workings of the battlestars, to make them more vulnerable. And they'd succeeded, though not quite as thoroughly as Baltar -- *damn him forever to a thousand Hades!* -- had planned, with his spies and his traitors. *I'll find them, I swear -- and they'll pay in full...*

But what price was he paid? What's the reward for selling out the Fifth Fleet? And does his treachery extend farther? How far?

There will be a reckoning. Some day, Baltar, you will pay for the blood shed today...

Cain swore it on everything he held sacred, then again on everything he held profane. He swore it on his soul, on the lives and souls of every man and woman aboard the PEGASUS, on the souls of every person who'd lost his or her life this fateful, ill-omened day.

One way or another, I will make you pay, Baltar. The Lords willing, you will pay in full.

But for now...

The fires of vengeance had to be banked. He had to find a way for his people to survive, for his ship to become the instrument of his revenge. If he accomplished nothing else in his life, he *must* have vengeance for the lives Baltar took with his treason. *Surely the just Lords will grant me that!*

Cain stared out the port, breathing heavily in his cold fury. He had to save his ship. He stared at the tylium asteroids, those bombs the size of planets. The PEGASUS and a Cylon base star playing tag among them... Just part of the trap... A trap...

A slow smile grew on his face. He had a plan...

Still smiling grimly, Commander Cain took up his riding crop, thrust his arms into the sleeves of his jacket, and strode from his quarters, the minor details of his plan already forming into one beautiful, grisly, explosive scheme.

IX

Somehow, the frail, damaged craft made it to the PEGASUS. Orestes roused himself from his brooding long enough to help the man next to him disembark. Astarte took the man's other arm when it became apparent the pilot's legs were injured; he couldn't walk, the result of a near-crash. But at least he was alive, which was more than some could say.

They stumbled toward the wall, supporting the pilot, then eased him to the deck between them as they themselves sank down, panting, to wait for a medic. Over a dozen of their fellow refugees were crowded together near them, and still more were coming from the shuttle. Beej, a doctor, who'd been scurrying from patient to patient during the long trip, held court over the unloading.

"What do we do now, Captain?" Astarte spoke with more spirit than he expected, considering what they'd just been through.

He glanced sideways at her, remembering he was responsible for the bruise on her cheek. "I don't really know. I guess we just wait."

"Maybe we can help the emergency teams," she suggested, then followed her words with action by springing nimbly to her feet and extending a hand to him.

"Good idea," Beej commented, appearing beside them. "First, help the people still on the shuttle. There're a couple of litters to be carried. Go on," he ordered. "I want to take another look at this man's splints." The doctor knelt beside the man they'd carried off the shuttle. A female med tech from the PEGASUS joined him in an instant, a med kit in her hands.

"Right." Wearily, Orestes allowed himself to be yanked back to his feet. *Why can't they just let me collapse somewhere?* They headed for the shuttle.

Moments later, Cain strode into the confusion of the landing bay, accompanied by Captain Graham, the pudgy Chief of Supply. The Commander saw Astarte help a limping woman across the deck. Captain Orestes, whom he recognized as one of the BRITANNICA pilots, was behind her, helping to carry a litter. He crossed the deck, halting where the two reasonably uninjured pilots left the wounded to the care of a medical team.

"Captain Orestes!"

"Yes, sir?" He found the strength to stand to attention.

"Where's your ship?"

"Borrowed, sir. I'm grounded for the time being, unless you've got a spare Viper, or some other duty for me?" He looked half-dead on his feet. Smoke and ash stained his hair, skin, and clothing; he was in no condition to be flying -- but he could still assist Graham.

"Other duty, I'm afraid. Captain Graham here needs a little help with a flash check of our storage bays. You available?"

"I guess so, Commander."

"Good. Graham, here's your man, Captain Orestes of the BRITANNICA." Cain always knew the names of those in his command. "Astarte, you can assist them in a moment. Go ahead, gentlemen." He remained where he was, his grey-blue eyes piercing and holding the girl; she stood at attention.

Orestes spared them both a glance, then followed Graham across the deck. The man was already explaining that they were to determine exactly what explosive potential Commander Cain still had aboard his battlestar.

"Sir?" Astarte questioned meekly when Cain continued to study her.

"You've got your father's eyes, I see," he commented, as though noticing them for the first time.

"Uh, yes, sir." She was clearly puzzled.

"I'm glad you made it. I heard what happened to Devon. When we didn't hear anything from you, we assumed the worst."

She glanced briefly after the retreating blond Captain. "I ran into Captain Orestes, sir. I guess I spent most of my time flying around the BRITANNICA with him. We saw her destroyed, from the shuttle..."

Cain nodded briefly, his hard face touched for a moment with sadness and bitter anger at the loss of friends and ships. "We know about Commander Hera. I understand you did quite well out there. You must have, to be back alive and relatively unhurt. Nasty bruise, that."

She blushed at the reference to her cheek, but straightened tired shoulders and protected Orestes. "Just a little accident. I did what I could."

"Cadet, I think you've had your baptism. You're a real Warrior now. Pick up your Sergeant's insignia in my quarters after this is over."

"Yes, sir!"

"I'll arrange with the Quartermaster to have it properly noted. You had only a section or two left at the Academy, I understand."

She smiled again. "I'm sure you were aware of that when you took me aboard." There was mischief in her suddenly-saucy voice; she was elated at her promotion.

"Yes, I was."

"Commander Cain?" She knew she should be hastening after Orestes and Graham, who were plainly waiting for her. "May I ask a question?"

"What is it, Sergeant?"

"My father, sir. He always had the best things to say about you. When I told him I wanted to fly with the PEGASUS, he said that was good. A few sections later, you showed up at my door at the Academy, with all the right forms already completed, so I could finish my time on a battlestar, and graduate with no problems, with nothing irregular on my record. That's highly unorthodox, sir. Why did you do it? And how do you know my father?"

He touched her chin, raising it slightly. The girl was definitely her father's daughter, in behaviour as well as in looks. She deserved an explanation. "Your father and I flew together, yahrens ago. He saved my life in battle once -- then I saved the battle. I got a Cluster and a promotion; he got a disability pension. Haven't seen much of him since, but I swore I owed him for it. One day, he showed up and said this was the way to pay him back."

Astarte's blue-green eyes widened at the revelation. "He never told me he knew you personally! And Mother never mentioned it, either!"

"I was in space, and he was grounded. I think he was bitter for a while, but he got over it. I'm glad. He met your mother later, in one of the medical centres, I think. It really doesn't matter. I've paid that little debt. And from now on, young lady, you'll get no special favours on my battlestar, no preferential treatment. You'll earn your keep."

"Of course, Commander," she replied proudly.

He pointed toward the two officers waiting at the lift. "Better get started, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir! Sorry to have taken up so much of your time." She hurried across the deck to join the patient men.

"Find out what you needed to know, Cadet?" Orestes inquired. He was leaning against the railing, as if ready to collapse at any micron.

"Wrong rank -- I'm a Sergeant," she replied archly.

He found a smile. "Good for you."

The trio boarded the lift, and it began to ascend. Alongside them, a second lift passed on its way down. On it was a large, burly individual carrying a long case. As he shifted the container on his shoulder, he caught a glimpse of the people in the other lift.

"You Cap'n Orestes?" the man bellowed as they passed the midway point of their meeting.

"Sure. Why?" The tech looked vaguely familiar.

"Yer sister's bin lookin' fer ya," the man hollered back as he sank from sight.

"What?" Orestes screamed, grabbing the railing to peer down at him. "Electra's here?"

"Last time I saw 'er, anyway, alive an' lookin' fer ya," a disembodied voice answered.

Orestes stared at his two companions, his mouth slack; then he suddenly whooped with unconcealed joy, grabbing Astarte in a tight embrace before planting a kiss on her bruised cheek. "Electra's alive! My sister's *alive*!"

"So, celebrate later," Graham interrupted with a cheery smile. "We still got work to do."

Orestes laughed, restored to life and good humour, still clutching the breathless Astarte. "You know, Graham, I don't even mind!"

* * * *

Dr. Rafael looked up as he heard somebody call his name. He'd been on duty in the landing bay since the beginning of the battle long centars before, and it seemed the casualties would never stop coming. Most of the survivors from the rendezvous point were injured, and the medics who accompanied them were often among the wounded themselves, needing help but somehow still ministering to their people. Galswintha was with an emergency team at present, and Rafael grabbed whatever help passed by. The PEGASUS medical staff was being pushed beyond reasonable limits, but they had no choice.

"What is it now?" he called, wiping his hands on his blood-stained, smoke-impregnated trousers as he got to his feet amidst the clutter, his brief rest over.

He saw two women coming toward him, both wearing pilots' uniforms; they supported a tall man between them. He had to be seeing double. *Two Celenes? Can't be. Too much duty, too many centars...*

They saw his confused expression.

"My sister Celeste transferred from the GALACTICA after Livia's accident," the petite Celene explained, gasping; the big man was a heavy burden for two small women. "This is Paris; he's from Adama's command, too. His hands are burnt, and I think he's been flying that way for centars."

"Put him down," the doctor directed. He reached for a small body scanner and a burn kit. The pilots knelt next to their friend.

His supplies were almost gone; as he glanced around the bay, Rafael suspected he'd need more medication and oxygen breathers before long. "I'll check him out. Celene, go down to Life Centre. I need burn salve and breathers, if they've got any to spare. Celeste, is it? Help hold him still. This may sting..."

One woman ran. The other pulled the injured man's head to her shoulder and held his hand as Rafael ran the scanner over it, then began preliminary first aid, injecting an analgesic.

Paris winced a little, pulling away from Celeste and staring down at his burnt hands; he was barely half-conscious. "I'll never fly again," he whispered woodenly.

"Don't think like that," Rafael ordered, not liking the lacklustre look in the other man's eyes or the flush to his sallow skin. How to reassure a patient, when the doctor himself was none too sure? "You'll be fine." He tried to sound convincing.

The Warrior shook his head. "Too many burns...too much damage... Flew too long... I'll never fly again."

Rafael injected more medication, this time to prevent infection and blood poisoning. Paris swooned back into Celeste's slender arms.

The doctor called to a sturdy med tech, gesturing toward the injured pilot. "Help get him out of the way, and call Galswintha to look at him. Special favour to me." The man nodded, and Paris was soon settled aside, his hands bandaged, making room for more injuries.

The doctor took a last look at his handiwork. *Yes, Winna can help here. She'll be here soon...*

A skinny, smoke-stained man ran by. Rafael noted the patch proclaiming him from the BRITANNICA. "You! Are you all right?"

"I'm fine!" the man yelled back. "I always look like this. I'm going to help the tech crews!"

"Good, I guess," the doctor muttered, shaking his head. The man looked like he belonged in Life Centre, being treated for shock, smoke inhalation, and malnutrition. But if he was still on his feet... He shook his head again, then wearily went to respond to another frantic summons.

* * * * *

Electra was near despair. After returning from the final skirmishes of the space battle, she'd resumed her search for her brother, but no one had seen or heard from Orestes since his landing on the BRITANNICA that last time, just before the battlestar died. He must've stayed too long, trying to reach the Commander; but whatever he'd said or done, it hadn't been enough. And he must not have gotten out.

The safety of the evacuation shuttles had been Electra's primary responsibility. But because of that, she'd had to leave her brother -- and he must have died. *I got the shuttles safely to the PEGASUS, through the hell-storm of Cylon fire. But no one's heard from Orestes...*

Half hidden by a heavy metal girder, she sank down and leaned her head on her knees, but her eyes were too hot and stinging to cry; the tears wouldn't come. She sighed heavily.

"And you're...?"

She glanced up into a tired face, lined and worried, that had seen too many injuries. The insignia at his throat proclaimed him a medic.

Electra shook her head. "No, I'm all right. Just tired. It...wasn't easy out there, and it's no better now." The stinging grew worse; she blinked at some non-existent sliver in her eye.

"Thank the Lords for that. Don't think badly of me if I leave right away, but it hasn't been easy here, either." He rose from his knees and hurried away with his emergency med kit.

She watched him go, then stared blankly for a long time -- she wasn't sure how long -- watching legs pass by without stopping, some striding briskly, some dragging tiredly, some being supported by others. Finally, a pair of legs stopped in front of her, and after a long moment, they registered on her mind. She turned her gaze upward.

Commander Cain stared down at her bedraggled, huddled form. Lieutenant Sheba stood behind him.

I must look a sight... She was smudged with smoke. There were scratches from broken wires across her hands; her uniform was scorched; her tangled hair fell in complete disarray. Wearily, she pulled herself to her feet, and to some semblance of military alertness.

"Sir?"

"Major, I've got a problem," he began without preamble. "My Flight Commander was killed out there, and you are now ranking pilot aboard the PEGASUS. I need a Flight Commander, *now*. Can you do it?"

"I'll try," she responded, understandably without enthusiasm. "What do you want me to do?"

"Can you get all the surviving pilots and Vipers into some cohesive fighting force in the next few centars?"

She stared back in horror. "What?" *Lord of ALL, we're not going on the offensive now?*

"By then, the Cylons may have figured out where we're hiding. By then, my plan should be ready for operation. And by then, I may need fighters ready, and this ship can't be left undefended. I need my squadrons back at alarm-ready as soon as possible." His voice was brisk and sharp, but she thought she detected a pleading note in it that touched her somewhere deep inside. He needed a job done, and he was offering that job to her.

If she could absorb some of his strength, carry it with her, convey it to the pilots... *Well, maybe there's a chance to do what he's asking...* "I'll try, sir. I'll give it my best shot."

He studied her frankly, then nodded. "Good. I'm depending on you. Go to it. Sheba, help her out, will you?" He raised his riding crop in salute, then strode away, leaving both women behind.

He's depending on me. Lords, I'm supposed to take these shell-shocked survivors of disaster and mold them into a fighting force in a few centars' time... It might be impossible, but she would damned well do her best. She couldn't let Cain down. In that moment, Cain's aura became something tangible to her. A Warrior would give nothing less than all for that man...

She glanced at Sheba, who looked almost as weary as she felt, but a lot more optimistic. "Let's get going. We've only got a few centars, and a lot to do."

Sheba nodded. "We can maintain simultaneous contact with both bays through the auxiliary computer hook-up on Level Two Beta. It's right in the cradle between the bays, and there are no fires there. We'll know how many pilots survived, and from which ships, and how well they can be grouped into teams, since everyone checked in at that point. I guess the first thing we'll need is a regular patrol roster..."

They set themselves a quick pace as they hurried away. Whatever Cain's plan, they had little time.

* * * * *

Gavain lay motionless in the life support pod, and Rissian could tell from the yellowish cast to his friend's dark skin that things weren't going well. A shadow fell over him as Dr. Helena checked the injured man. She shook her head, a slight pursing of her perfect lips the only sign of any reaction.

"Well?" Rissian asked anxiously. "What is it, doctor? Is he going to be all right? How serious is it?"

She studied him thoughtfully; he could sense no feeling in her cool blue eyes. "The head wound is very serious. It's haemorrhaging severely into the cranial cavity. The pressure has probably already caused brain damage."

Rissian looked ready to collapse himself; he was breathing heavily, fear evident in his wide brown eyes. "Do something about it! He's a Warrior, he can't have brain damage..."

"We've tried drainage, but some of the fluids are leaking within the brain itself," she tried to explain.

"So, operate! Can't you doctors do anything about it? He's my wingman, my friend! You can't just let this happen to him and do *nothing*! I mean, he'll never forgive you if he forgets his arias!"

"Lieutenant, your friend is dying," Helena informed him starkly.

"What?"

"Lieutenant Gavain is dying."

"I heard you!" He stared at her composed face, finding no sympathy in her careful expression, and hating her all the more for it. "Why aren't you operating? Aren't you even going to try and save him?"

"Lieutenant..."

"Aren't you even going to try?" he yelled.

"I'm going to explain something to you, Lieutenant," she said, taking his arm.

"Yes, explain, you cold-blooded bitch!" he spat, pulling free. "You even look like an icicle!"

She continued as if he hadn't spoken, but there was a faint flush of colour on her pale cheeks. "Lieutenant, parts of this ship are still on fire. There is a danger of energizer failure, and the possibility of renewed Cylon attack. Considering your friend's condition, I would still risk the surgery, except for several other pertinent factors."

Rissian was shaking with rage. Some inner voice warned him, however, that slugging his friend's doctor would not be any help to him. "So, tell me those factors," he growled through clenched teeth, his tone coldly threatening.

Helena refused to be intimidated. "You can see that every bed in my Life Centre is filled. There are many other men and women in the landing bays and corridors, injured crew members who need medical assistance. Now, Lieutenant, how can I justify letting a dozen or more of those people die



while ordering an entire surgical team -- with all the necessary equipment and supplies -- to operate on a man who will probably die anyway, or at least not recognize you if he wakes up? Will you tell those dozen people and their friends and families why we lost them? I'm put in a position I don't much like, Lieutenant, forced to decide who can be saved and who can't -- but that's my responsibility, and I will do it as best I can."

"So you get to play god with other people's lives!" he said bitterly. "And we get no choice in it!"

"I don't like playing god, as you say. I'm trying to save lives, as many as I can. Use your head, man. Could you make any other choice, at an exchange rate of twelve to one?"

Rissian turned blindly back to the pod, refusing to accept the cold logic that meant his friend didn't even have a chance. "So Gavain dies," he said flatly, as if it suddenly meant nothing to him any longer.

"Stay with him," she said more gently. "If he wakes before the end, he may know you, or recognize you as a friend. A familiar face at his side, a known touch -- those can be infinitely valuable, can make it easier to leave this life. I know -- I've seen it before, and it may make things easier for you, too. I think he'd want you here."

"You're damned right, I'll be here! But you won't. Go away."

Helena knew there was nothing more she could say or do for either man, and in all honesty, there were many others who needed her more, who needed her immediately. She turned away, the nearly emotionless mask of her face on the verge of shattering; she held it in place through the sheer force of her strong will.

Rissian sat numbly in the chair someone brought him, his eyes fastened on the pod's indicators of heart and brain activity. Gavain's heart was still beating more or less steadily, although the time between pulses was frightening; he could feel his own rapid heartbeats despite the tightness in his chest. He couldn't even begin to decipher the mysterious flutterings of the other graphs; but, knowing brain damage was occurring, he felt his despair increase with every shift of every line.

"Dr. Rafael needs more burn salves and oxygen breathers."

"You'll have it in a centon, Lieutenant. Cadmus, get it for her."

"I'll wait here."

The conversation made no impression on Rissian, who sat alone in his misery. When the slight pressure of a woman's hand warmed his shoulder, he barely blinked.

"How's your friend?" a sympathetic voice asked quietly.

"Dying," he answered hollowly. "And there's nothing the Frost Queen will do about it."

"I'm sorry... So many are dying, we've lost so many friends..."

The simple acknowledgement of shared sorrow was too much; it was as if a dam had broken. Rissian began to cry, cursing the tears that spilled down his face. "Why?" he demanded. "It didn't seem like so much; he said it was *nothing*. He was still walking and everything, but now, he's dying, and nobody will do anything for him but watch him go..."

The heart monitor was suddenly still and silent. Other lines evened out, or disappeared; lights blinked out. The screens over Gavain's life pod were empty.

Celene gasped. Rissian stared for a long moment, his own heart nearly stopping, then turned in his chair to bury his face against the woman's uniform. She put her arms around him and bowed her head, letting the man cry. Tears were all anybody could give Gavain now -- tears, and memories of the past.

X

Cain made his way to the Bridge. His eyes darted around the large Command Centre, noting each position, who was on duty there, what the large screens had to tell him. Only then did he cross to his command deck, joining Colonel Kleopatra and Lieutenant Tolan.

"Status?" he demanded.

"Scanners still only marginally functional," the Executive Officer reported, hiding her weariness, "and Viper patrols report no evidence of the base star's location. Evacuation of VENTURE is nearly complete. Fire Control has most of the fires out, but is still working in Gamma Section, Decks Four and Five. No report yet from Major Daniel on the nature of the incendiary devices discovered prior to the battle. Medical is handling casualties with admirable speed and skill; however, nine more people have died in the last center."

"Anything from Captain Graham?"

She punched in a code, then studied the supplied statistics. "Horus has reported in from Alpha Section, but we're still waiting to hear from Graham in Beta, sir."

"It'll do. Have Horus begin transporting solenite capsules to the shuttle bay. Tell him to get some pilots -- volunteers, naturally -- to take the explosives to VENTURE. Have them load the engineering section, and rig it for as big an explosion as can be arranged. Get Sherlock's best men there to oversee it; I don't want any mistakes."

Kleopatra glanced up at him, confused, but immediately put in the call to Engineering. While Cain couldn't spare Major Sherlock, his Chief of Engineering, at this time, there were several other excellent men who could handle the job.

"Sherlock's arranging the engineers; Horus acknowledges the order; and Commander Ismenos demands an explanation for rigging his ship to explode," she was able to report a few moments later, calling to Cain as he prowled the deck; he was investigating the damage done to his Bridge.

The Commander's smile was nasty. "Tell him we're preparing a present for the Cylons, to thank them for the marvellous surprise party they threw in our honour."

"Yes, sir!" Kleopatra was beginning to understand.

When given the somewhat cryptic explanation, Commander Ismenos didn't seem to find it particularly revealing -- but he accepted it. Of course, he didn't really have much choice...

Cain soon rejoined his aides, studying Tolan's screen carefully before speaking. "How long have you been on duty, Colonel?"

"Uh..." Kleopatra stuttered, staring blankly. "I don't remember."

"I thought not. Take a break, catch a nap or something. I'll need you fresh later."

"What about you, sir? You haven't had any rest, either." She resisted the idea of leaving the Bridge, although the situation was much less grim than it had been for centuries, and she really was tired.

"You first. I want to make sure the VENTURE is ready, then I'll take a break. But I want one of us here at all times. I'll have Major Electra check with you on the flight rosters. Let me know how realistic they are, compared to our casualties and the damage reports."

"If you insist, Commander." With obvious reluctance, Kleopatra made her way from the Bridge.

"Anything, Tolan?"

"Negative, sir. Several shuttles are loading for the trip to the VENTURE. No recent communications from any more survivors, nor any contact with the Cylons. There're only a handful of patrols up at the moment, all that could be mustered immediately." He was almost apologetic, as if expecting Cain

to blame him for the paucity of patrols.

The Commander surprised him. "Fine. There'll be more out there soon. We don't want the Cylons locating us too early, and I'm sure Major Electra has all primary sectors covered. We've got a general idea what's going on; that's all we need for now." He fell silent, continuing to observe every small movement on the Bridge with great keenness, until some of his duty officers were afraid to yawn or rub the weariness from their eyes.

* * * * *

Orestes considered grumbling, but his throat was too constricted to do much more than breathe as he crawled through the narrow conduit. He had to conserve what air he could take in.

When Graham had tagged him for this duty, he'd neglected to mention they would be working in an area of the ship where several fires still burned. Fires were something he could deal with -- but the out-of-the-way corridors and passages they had to take to get around them were getting to him. These technicians' access tubes were narrow, and dimly lit -- and the Captain's claustrophobia was having a field day. While he got along fine in Vipers, which at least gave the illusion of having all of space around them, the metal-lined, pipe-infested tubes through which he had to crawl made him extremely nervous. The realisation that his fear was irrational didn't stop his palms from sweating, his heart from thumping wildly, or his mind from insisting frantically that he escape immediately from this constantly contracting sepulchre.

Behind him, the slender, now-fearless Astarte had no difficulties. "Is something wrong, Captain?" she inquired. In the light of her lantern, she could see he'd stopped; she, too, halted -- before she ran into his boots. Both Warriors carried arc lanterns secured at their waists, to light their passage through the darkness.

"Nothing wrong," he called back wryly. "Just drying my hands." He rubbed his palms against his greasy, smoke-stained trousers, glad they'd soon be back in open corridors again. He wished he were there already.

A few more centons of crawling brought the two Warriors to the proper junction, and they were able to stand upright and breathe again. There were no detectable impurities in the air; Fire and Damage Control had successfully confined the fires to other sections of this deck.

"Well, there's Hold 4-X," Orestes said, pointing to the sealed door across from their access hatch. It was well-labelled, with the appropriate required notation that it might contain explosives.

"Then 4-Y should be down the corridor," Astarte replied, glancing around curiously. She'd never been in this part of a battleship before, although she was thoroughly familiar with all the standard blue-prints.

He checked the computer inventory sheet Graham had supplied. "You take X; I'll take Y. It shouldn't take long to find out if everything's there; these supply statistics are pretty recent. Let me know if anything's wrong -- especially if you hear anything ticking in there." She stared at him with some horror until she realized he was joking; then she laughed with him. "Graham should be in 4-W by now -- he didn't have to take our short-cut; he'll probably join us before long. See you in a bit."

The Sergeant crossed the corridor and coded the access number; the hatch opened. She pulled her lantern free and shone it into the darkness for the moment it took her to activate the light panels; then she smiled and disappeared inside.

Orestes loped down the passageway. The access door for Hold 4-Y was, as expected, several metres farther along. However, when he tried to activate the lights in the massive chamber, nothing happened.

He played his arc lantern around for a moment. *Hmmm, lights must be damaged, or maybe shorted out by the fire. Guess I'll have to play this one blind.* Chuckling at his own joke, he proceeded into the hold, stepping carefully to avoid stumbling over any unseen obstructions.

The darkness would delay his job considerably. He was aware of the general location of the solenite capsules, and knew how many there should be -- they'd all been accounted for only two days before, in the search for bombs planted by saboteurs. However, the lack of light would make finding that spot a lot tougher. He also had to worry about bumping into things, and what those things might be...

The hold was eerie in the lantern's light, the small pool of illumination fading into strangely-

shaped shadows and distant flickers and reflections. When he looked up, the ceiling was barely visible. He made his way into an aisle between tall stacks of storage crates, shivering slightly in the cooler temperature of the hold.

Great setting for a horror story, he mused, glancing up. The kind with lost ships full of ghostly crews, like we used to scare each other with when we were little...

The memory made him smile; he and his sister had been very good at making up such stories. Then one of Electra's more frightening tales crossed his mind, and he decided they weren't so funny after all.

He thought he heard weight shifting somewhere on the metal floor, and glanced around sharply, but could see nothing out of the ordinary in the limited glow of his lamplight. "You and your damned Cylon ghosts!" he muttered. "Now, I'm hearing things!" He forced himself to turn around and continued along the aisle between the crates.

The hairs on his neck suddenly rose; a shiver ran down his back. He thought he heard another sound -- only closer -- and slowly transferred the arc lamp to his right hand, then reached for his laser with his left. *This was no trick of a vaguely-remembered childhood fantasy -- he was not alone in the hold!*

"Don't touch it," a man's voice drawled in the darkness. "I'm armed, and you're already in my sights."

With an audible intake of breath, Captain Orestes froze. The man was behind and above him; the light made him a good target, while he couldn't even see his assailant. He had to stall, find out what was going on... "Who's there?"

"A ghost," the man chuckled. "No maintenance check scheduled in here for today; I checked. So who're you?"

"Captain Orestes," he replied cautiously. Was this man a stowaway? A deserter? A tech gone a little paranoid? "I was sent here to check on a few supplies."

"Oh, really?" The man sounded genuinely interested. "Which ones? And why?"

Orestes was on guard. "I'm not sure. The Commander wanted it done, so I'm doing it."

"Which supplies?" the man repeated in a quiet, deadly voice.

He had no choice. "Solenite."

There was no response.

"Uh, can I ask your name? What you're doing here? I didn't think anyone else was around," he probed, trying to keep his voice as even as possible.

"My name? I suppose I can tell you that. It's too late to make any difference. My name's Tophet. Stay where you are!" he warned with a growl as Orestes started.

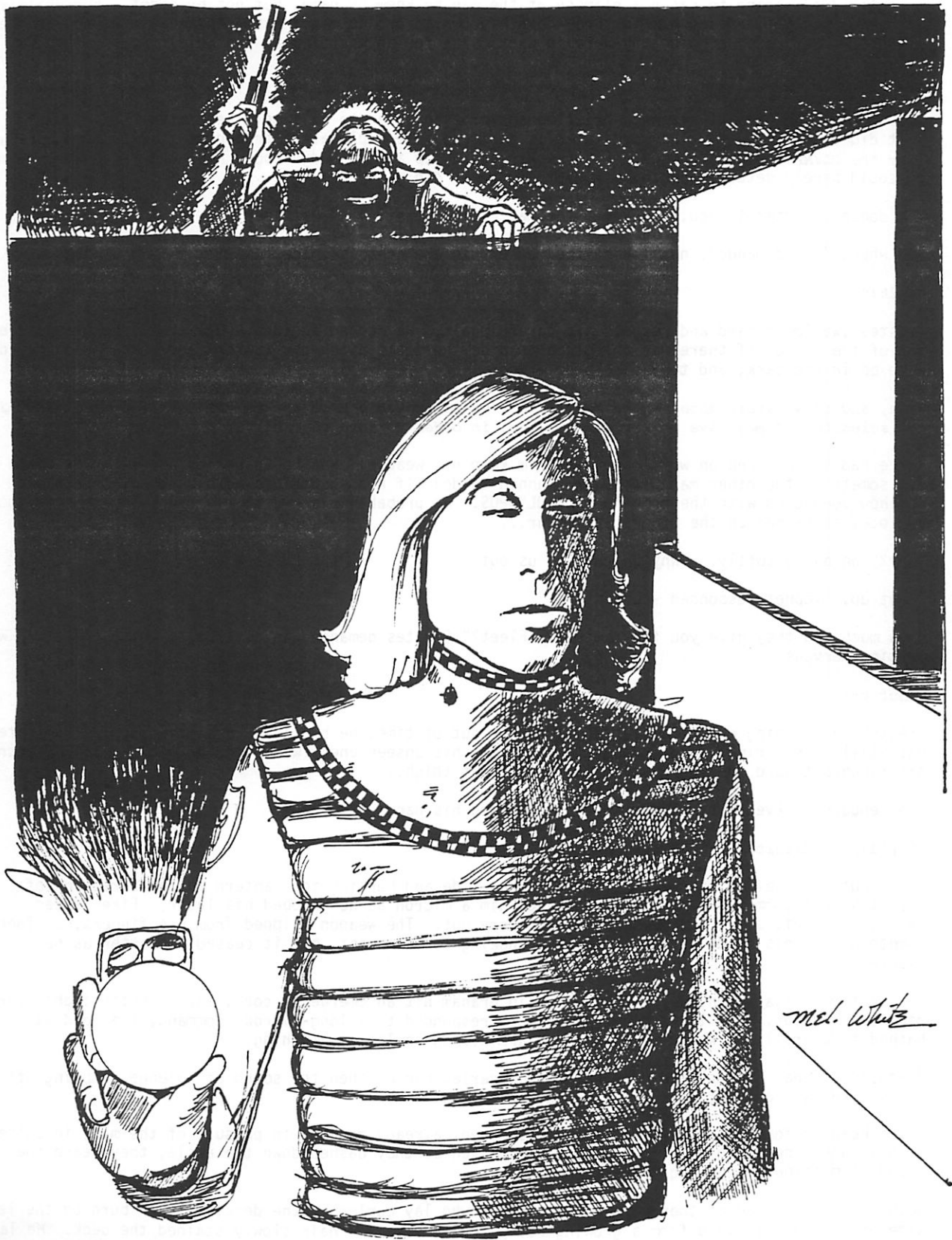
The Captain had almost turned, but he halted instantly at Tophet's command. If the man had a weapon on him... "How'd you get here?"

"Same as you, hot-shot. I flew."

There was something sinister in the man's gloating drawl, which could have dire consequences. Orestes felt like he was suddenly caught up in one of his sister's stories -- and he wanted very much to get out of it, or to wake up, whichever would make the situation go away. "Still doesn't explain why you're hiding in here," he commented. His attempt to keep his voice matter-of-fact was improving. "Doesn't tell why you're sitting in the dark, holding a weapon on a fellow Warrior, either. Think we could talk about it?"

"Why don't you start walking instead?"

Orestes realized the small sounds he'd been hearing were from Tophet as he scrambled across the crates. The man was almost above him, undoubtedly still with the weapon trained on him, following him without having to risk getting too close. The man was a Warrior; he suspected they'd be fairly well matched in a physical fight -- and Tophet obviously didn't want to permit him the opportunity.



"Right," he replied, then started walking carefully down the aisle, cautiously glancing up at the crate's edge, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man he knew by name, but not by sight. Fortunately, Tophet hadn't yet ordered him to throw down his own laser; he might get a chance at the end of the aisle... "Uh...are we going anywhere in particular for any particular reason?"

"Don't worry about it."

The hair on the nape of his neck bristled again. "You plan to kill me," he stated flatly. "Why? What did I ever do...?" The words died as an incredible explanation presented itself. *The man was from the OLYMPUS!* He stopped in his tracks, gazing up at the ledge above him, and the shadowy form he could barely detect. "Nothing I did! But what did you do?"

"It doesn't matter to you, *Captain*," the man replied easily. "Just keep walking."

"To where?" he demanded, not liking the mockery in the other's voice.

"Walk!"

Orestes swallowed hard and resumed his careful gait. He needed an idea -- *fast*. If he got to the end of the aisle, if there was any place to hide, he could ditch the lantern and run. Then they'd both be in the dark, and they'd both be armed...

Yeah, and if we start shooting at each other, we'll probably blow up the PEGASUS if we miss and hit the solenite. I may have to let him kill me, in order to save the ship...

There had to be a reason why Tophet let him keep his weapon. Was he to be left to take the blame for something the other man did -- or planned to do? If his suspicions were correct, Tophet was somehow connected with the bombs on the OLYMPUS. He probably planned to rig the solenite here to explode, as he had on the other battlestar...

"Why?" he asked softly. "Why'd you sell us out?"

"Shut up," Tophet responded scornfully.

"How much did they give you for the Fifth Fleet?" Orestes demanded in a stronger voice. The man was getting nervous...

"Shut up!"

Orestes was running out of aisle, and probably out of time; he had to make a move soon. The lantern was still in his right hand. Unsure how closely his unseen enemy was watching him, he slowly inched his fingers toward the laser strapped to his left thigh...

"Far enough." Even more slowly, Orestes dropped his hand.

"Captain?" *Astarte!*

"Look out!" he yelled, throwing himself to one side and hurling the lantern in the direction of Tophet's last command. That action delayed him a micron as he grabbed his laser. Fire lanced through his left side, and he heard himself cry out. The weapon slipped from his fingers... Then something hit his head; he thought he was choking for a moment, but it ceased to matter as he blacked out.

"Laser fire! Stay down, Sergeant!" Captain Graham hit an emergency code, and Tophet's light-over-ride sparked out. The light panels instantly responded to a long-overdue command; the hold was bathed in a brilliant white glare as an alarm klaxon howled its warning.

"Hades!" Graham and Astarte both heard the snarled curse, then the sound of someone tumbling off the stacked wooden crates and running across the metal deck.

"He's heading for the crane lift!" Graham shouted, already running in pursuit of the man, in spite of his bulk; the woman was right behind him. Even as they dashed down the aisle, they heard the sound of machinery cranking into action.

Both Warriors halted as they came upon Orestes, who lay curled on the deck, a laser burn on the left side of his shirt; blood from a growing red patch in his fair hair slowly stained the deck. He lay amidst a scattering of long metal tubes that had fallen as he stumbled away from Tophet's laser fire.

"See to him!" Graham ordered, panting slightly; he wasn't very athletic, and it showed. "I'll follow the lift." He ran several steps before calling back one final command. "And keep your laser ready!"

Astarte dropped to her knees beside Orestes, her weapon in one hand as she checked his pulse with the other. He was still breathing, though barely, and his pulse was shallow. He suddenly gasped in pain as his eyes opened, and he tried to pull himself up.

"No! Rest, Captain. Don't move. You've been shot. Please, try to stay still until a medic arrives. The alarm's been sounded..."

"Tophet..." he coughed. "Name's...Tophet, from...OLYMPUS... Bombs... Get him..." He passed out again.

She watched as his fingers clutched futilely at the burning agony that penetrated even his unconscious mind. She was alert, but helpless to aid him as he moaned in pain. She shoved the metal tubes aside, then could do nothing but wait.

* * * * *

It didn't take long for Electra and Sheba to complete the first part of their task and head to the Bridge to make their report.

Cain saw them instantly. "Well?" he demanded at once.

"Four squadrons, though they're somewhat undermanned, with all the injured personnel and wrecked Vipers we have," Electra told him, glancing across the Bridge complex. Most of the duty officers seemed near exhaustion, and some had apparently come on duty direct from fighting fires, if their soot-streaked faces were any indication. *How long have we been fighting?*

"Commander," she continued, "I still don't know how to set up our plan of attack, or just exactly what you want from me, and I don't know who's dependable from your ship. I've got a few patrols out, and a few more on the way, but I don't know what to do next. What is next, sir?" she pleaded, her voice shaking in spite of her earlier resolve not to falter.

"Two strike teams, that's what I'll need. Two volunteer strike forces." He stared intently at the two women. "Sheba," he said brusquely, indicating his daughter. "She's good. Electra, you take one strike wing; Sheba can take the other. Which squadron do you know best, from your rearranged teams, Major?"

"Most of the BRITANNICA survivors are docked in Beta Bay, sir."

"Good, that's your wing, then, in Beta Bay. Sheba, you're flight leader for Silver Spar, and Alpha Bay's your responsibility until things are working properly around here again. Divide the volunteers between you for this mission. Simple Academy manoeuvres, Major, that's all I'll need. When VENTURE's loaded, you'll have to be ready. That'll be a few centars yet, so you'll have time to discuss things with your volunteers. In the meantime, make sure the Cylons don't discover our hiding place; get some more patrols out, and don't provoke anything. Can you handle it?" *Lords, I wish I could take charge of the strike teams myself, but I'm needed on the Bridge...*

Electra nodded, puzzled, then pushed aside the stray hair the movement caused to fall into her eyes. "What's the plan?"

"We're going to surprise the Cylons. The VENTURE is going to be our decoy, and your volunteers are going to be the bait that leads the Cylons there. For now, assemble your teams, and warn your crews to be careful. Sheba, take care of yourself."

Tolan reclaimed the Commander's attention with news of a problem in one of the solenite holds. Electra and Sheba had their orders; they were now beyond his conscious consideration.

As they left the Bridge, Electra wondered if she'd survive the day. Playing bait for the Cylons! Of course, dying might be the only way she'd get a chance to rest... It seemed she'd been fighting and running forever. Somehow, being Flight Commander had no glamour in it at a time like this, only painful duty and aching muscles, and a weary mind hampered by uncertainty. She didn't even have the energy to be miffed that Cain had appointed a flight leader and squadron commander without her recommendation; besides, resentment would be futile and purposeless. She didn't need to remind herself that she'd asked him for help in selecting people...

"Electra?" Sheba asked hesitantly as they headed back to the landing bays. She had a patrol to fly;



Electra had pilots to locate.

"Yes?" she responded, still wondering how she was going to handle the unexpected responsibilities. *Damn it, I've been flight leader; I should be able to handle this, too. It's still the shock of everything...*

"I realize the Commander went over your head in making me flight leader, especially since I'm still just a Lieutenant, and one should be a Captain to qualify for..."

"Look, I've listened to you, both in battle and in the help you've been giving me here. You're a good Warrior. A little rough yet, maybe, and a little young, but you'll make a good flight leader. You're competent, more so than some of those 'Captains' out there."

From the expression on her face, Sheba had more to say, but Electra raised a hand to stop her. "I realize you're Commander Cain's daughter, and you've had to live with that. Maybe it *was* a factor in his selecting you on the spot for this job. But I respect him enough to know that he wouldn't have chosen you if you weren't good at what you do."

Relief and gratitude fought the fatigue in the other woman's eyes.

Electra smiled. "Just come to me if you want to talk," she said, and discovered she meant it. "Right now, you're due on patrol. I'm going to make a quick stop in Life Centre to check on a few friends, and then I've got volunteers to find and check out with Colonel Kleopatra. See you later?"

Sheba smiled back. *She understands!* Both women instinctively knew that, in their tired sincerity, they'd each found a friend. They hugged briefly, then separated as they headed for their destinations. Among so many losses, they'd both gained something worth having...

* * * * *

As Tophet's supply lift ground to a halt, he leaped to the deck and ran for the Viper hangar. He'd been forced to play several short games of hide-and-seek with various personnel during his flight, but now escape was only moments away. Surely there'd be at least one fighter craft fueled and ready to go...

He'd stupidly permitted that Captain in the hold to identify him, but he was sure the others didn't know him, hadn't gotten a look at him. So even if Orestes were still alive, all they had was a name, with no face for quick identification.

He should've just dropped the man in his tracks when he first saw him, then run, but he'd wanted to find out what was going on. Cain had something up his sleeve -- that much, he could guess from what little the good Captain told him. But what was it?

And, after all, there was really no need to hide a body. In a few centars, it would make no difference. A murder might be diverting, but then they'd definitely search the hold...

But they were doing so anyway, he guessed. Knowing Cain was checking on the solenite, he couldn't risk rigging a bomb. *No, I had the right idea; I just didn't carry it out soon enough. I shouldn't have let myself be stalled those few centons, should have killed that Orestes before the other two arrived. Then no one would know...*

He paused in an alcove, catching his breath as he stared across the line of launch tracks. Yes, there were a few ships ready to be taken out. No one worried about a man hurrying on his way through the bays; he had to look presentable for just a few more centons...

The almost cadaverously thin man working on the nearest Viper waved to him. "She's all ready," he called in a pleased tone as he gestured at the ship.

Good. A ready ship, and the man's not from either the PEGASUS or the OLYMPUS. It'll be tough to identify me and find out where I've gone in the short time this battlestar has left...

"Thanks, uh..."

"Edric. Take care of her. We've got too many injured ships around here."

"Right. You can bet I'll take good care of her," Tophet replied fervently. *Bastard looks like he crawled out of somebody's nightmare, and sounds as weird as he looks...*

There was a commotion at the turbolift as he climbed into the Viper, and he hurried through the pre-

flight check-list. He'd never been a particularly imaginative or inspired pilot, but all he had to do was get off the ship. *Baltar's arranged everything else, and I'll come out of this alive. That small electronic device I've got will identify me if I encounter any Raiders before meeting the base star...*

"You! Wait!" somebody called.

He pretended not to hear and sealed the canopy with feverish movements. Glancing back, he saw both the tech who'd given him the Viper and another man -- Security, obviously -- running toward him. The Security man had a laser. Tophet grinned, waved at them, and pushed the throttle forward full-force.

The Viper leaped forward, streaking toward open space. He leaned back, taking a deep breath as he relaxed, listening to the confused babble on the com as he fled the battlestar. *Let them talk! Let them try to pursue me! I've got a head start; I'm in space; I'm safe!*

* * * * *

Electra strolled quietly through Life Centre, exchanging a word or two with the medics, moving on to stop briefly at beds where friends reposed. She took a silent moment to mourn a former lover who hadn't survived his injuries. Around her, med techs hurried with their duties, running from bed to bed, checking their patients, carrying supplies. And the doctor said things were slowing down?

A commotion from the next room announced the arrival of yet another new patient, and, from the hub-bub, it wasn't an ordinary injury. Curiosity led Electra to investigate.

As she entered the chamber, she saw several med techs transfer someone from a litter to a life pod. Hovering nearby, obviously wanting to help -- and just as obviously unable to do so -- was a young, dark-haired woman.

"Don't put him in that bed!" a black pilot insisted loudly. "Men die there!" Electra heard the raw pain in his voice, and guessed he'd lost a friend that day, too.

"He's not too badly injured," one of the doctors announced, standing with a hypo in her hand. "Lost some blood, looks like a minor concussion; he'll need a skin seal along those ribs..."

The Major would have stayed out of the way, but she heard the injured man's companion ask anxiously, "You're sure Captain Orestes will be all right?"

At the mention of the name, Electra froze momentarily, then shouldered her way closer to the bed. She stared at her brother's pale face, his blood-stained hair, the laser wound in his side. Someone began cutting away his shirt, and she reached for his hand. "He'll be all right?" she whispered, echoing Astarte's plea of only a few microns before.

"He'll be just fine," Dr. Helena repeated. "He was shot after surprising a saboteur in one of the holds, I understand. Now, just get out of my way, so I can do my job." She shooed everyone aside, then bent over her patient's body as med techs finished clearing the area. A curtain was pulled around the bed, guaranteeing privacy.

"What happened to him?" Electra demanded of the others as soon as they were out of the chamber.

"All I did was help carry a litter," Rissian demurred.

"Saboteur," Astarte explained. "We were checking solenite supplies. Somebody named Tophet, from the OLYMPUS, jumped him, tried to kill him. They think he's responsible for the bombs, too..."

"Tophet's responsible?" Rissian's voice rang out, his face twisted in fury. "That swaggering, two-faced, frak-eating, Cylon-loving, bitch-spawned..." The women stepped back in shock.

"You know him, then?" the Major probed, noting that the man was from the OLYMPUS.

"I know him," he replied succinctly. "I want him."

"I think Security's already after him," Astarte said meekly, ready to scurry back several more steps if necessary.

Rissian's anger at Gavain's death finally had an acceptable outlet. He could stop wishing Dr. Helena would step on a live solenite grenade. He'd never liked Tophet, anyway.

Electra caught his arm. "I'm Flight Commander now," she warned him quietly. "And I'm not taking any homicidal idiots into battle with me."

"I'm not homicidal," he replied in a soft, deadly voice. "I'm suffering understandable grief at my wingman's death, to more-or-less quote that frost-bitch doctor. I need a target for my grief. Give me a chance at the Cylons or their allies. I'm not particular." She would have shuddered at the veiled menace in his voice, but her attention was still half on her brother.

"Major," Astarte interrupted, "if you need pilots, I'm available. I've been flying with Captain Orestes all day. I need a Viper, but..."

Electra stared in wonder at the eager young face. So that explained where her brother had been. As she considered, she realized the girl was now probably somewhat familiar with their own peculiar flight manoeuvres and attack formations...

"I'm available, too, Major," Rissian said harshly.

She glanced from one to the other. "Volunteers only," she told them, making up her mind. "We're going to be the bait in some plan of Commander Cain's. You have to realize that it may be dangerous -- very dangerous."

"I understand," Astarte said.

"Good," was Rissian's only comment.

She studied them a moment longer. Then, "Let's get some Vipers. I'll come back later to see my brother."



XI

Sheba and Bojay, who both had functional Vipers, took one of the first patrols. Weaving cautiously through the tylium asteroids that were both their greatest threat and their major defence, Sheba took point, leaving Bojay to monitor communications while she tried to make sense of her scanners.

"Sheba! We got trouble coming!" her partner suddenly cried out.

"What is it?" she demanded anxiously, her eyes trying to take in what little was visible through her fighter's canopy. There was certainly nothing to be seen on the static-ridden scanners.

"According to the PEGASUS, a single Viper coming our way."

"So?" she asked in bewilderment.

"One Sergeant Tophet, in a stolen ship. On no condition is he to get past us... They think he's making a run for that base star."

"What?" she breathed incredulously. "Is he *crazy*?"

"They think he's the one who sabotaged the OLYMPUS. If we can convince him to come back with us, the Commander wants him alive. If not, we're to blow him out of the skies."

Sheba's heart hardened, squeezing out any sympathy. *This man might be the one responsible for that bomb in Garnyd's Viper, and for the deaths of four people... And now, he might be betraying us again, running for the Cylons...*

"We'll be ready for him," she said firmly. "He won't get by us."

"Acknowledged. That's what I told Core Command."

It was several long centons before Sheba picked up the stolen Viper as it moved into range of their patrol. She studied her scanner carefully to be absolutely certain it was a Colonial fighter, not a Raider; when the other craft refused to respond to her tentative recognition code, she was sure it was the traitor. "On scan, and moving into range, Bojay. Pick him up yet?"

"I see him," he replied quickly. "He's not even trying to be evasive."

"Hail him. I'll come up on his port side," she decided, leaving her wingmate to initiate contact.

"Sergeant Tophet." Bojay tried to speak as if this were merely a routine identification check. "This is Lieutenant Bojay, battlestar PEGASUS. Bring your craft to a halt. We have something to discuss."

"Go to Hades, Lieutenant," the criminal replied rudely. "I'm not going to let a single worn-out pilot stop me now. Get in my way, and I'll blast you to atomic dust."

While Bojay absorbed this threat, Sheba slipped into position behind Tophet's Viper.

"This is Lieutenant Sheba, Silver Spar strike leader, battlestar PEGASUS. Sergeant, slow to surrender. I have you in my sights, and my weapons are set on 'kill,'" she enunciated precisely. Her voice carried deadly overtones.

Both Warriors heard a curse, then the traitor banked his fighter away from Sheba, heading for the denser parts of the asteroid belt. For a seemingly endless moment, his Viper hung in Sheba's sights. Her hand tensed, her thumb on the firing control; she hesitated for a fraction of a micron...

And she couldn't fire.

"Sheba!" Bojay shouted. "He's banking! *Fire!*"

But she couldn't fire, not directly at another human being, a fellow Warrior in a Viper, one of her



own kind...

Then she detected something else on her erratic scanner, something coming out of the asteroids, coming up on Tophet. Her frozen blood thawed, rushing through her body with boiling speed. "Bojay! It's a Cylon!"

The Raider moved into position behind the fleeing Viper. *He's going to escape, and it's my fault...*

The Raider fired.

"No!" Both Warriors heard Tophet's final shriek. "I'm not...!"

Then there was silence. The renegade's ship exploded into minute fragments of metal. *He didn't even try to escape; he must've assumed the Cylon was his ally...*

The Cylon moved into Sheba's sights, and she found she could react again. With lightning speed, her thumb hit the firing mechanism, and a laser beam speared across space to touch the Raider with a light caress. The Cylon vessel blew apart in a fiery explosion, spreading into a cloud that engulfed the remains of the Colonial Viper.

Bojay and Sheba waited, expecting more of the enemy to appear, silently preparing to sell their lives as dearly as possible. Then it occurred to both of them that there were no more Raiders.

"Sheba?" Bojay cautiously re-opened communications. "Do you see anything?"

"Nothing," she replied softly.

"He must've been a straggler, lost from the rest. Do we report back to base?"

She released her pent breath. "Let's go."

* * * * *

Colonel Kleopatra took a brief nap and a shower during her rest period, and was preparing to return to the Bridge to relieve the Commander when the door chime announced she had a visitor. "Enter," she called quietly.

The door opened to reveal the ship's new Flight Commander. The statuesque blonde glanced around the chamber before entering.

"Umm, Commander Cain told me to check with you when I had my list of volunteers for his decoy action," she began. "Is now a good time, or should I talk to you about it later, on the Bridge?"

Kleopatra laughed as she returned to her mirror. "Catch me *now*. The Commander'd have my skin if he thought I dawdled to play with cosmetics." She dabbed a lip salve on her mouth, then reached for an eye shadow. "Please come in and sit down, and tell me what you've got. I hope I'm not that unapproachable."

Electra laughed with her, then settled somewhat gingerly on a divan. "I guess I'm having a little shock lag, changing ships and responsibilities in a centar's time, Colonel. Sorry if I seem a bit out of place -- but I feel that way. And your counterpart on the BRITANNICA was *very* unapproachable."

"I never thought he was." Kleopatra leaned against the edge of her desk. "But then, he *had* to be nice to me; we were of equal rank."

Electra nodded, glancing down at her list. "I have three strike wings assembled from the volunteers. I'll be leading Lieutenant Amun and Sergeant Astarte myself; Captain Heimdal will have Lieutenants Sif and Rissian; Captain Daystar will be teamed with Lieutenants Celeste and Celene. I know very few of them; most are from your ship. How do they sound to you?"

"Good people, some of our best pilots. Well-chosen. But does Sheba know she's been left off the mission roster? That won't make her very happy."

"She's handling the patrols for me, and is on patrol herself right now; she's due for a break." She hesitated. "Of course, if anything goes wrong, the Commander will need somebody who knows what's going on, somebody who can lead the other pilots in a centon's notice, without dropping the whole mess on some unprepared Warrior."

"Unprepared? As you were? I can understand that. Are you having many difficulties adapting?"

"I'm not sure if I ever will. I haven't had time yet to slow down and think about it -- I just keep going from one emergency to the next. I'm sure I can handle it -- I've been a squadron leader. It's just the *situation* that's so unexpected, so hard to deal with," Electra replied thoughtfully. She was successfully coming to grips with the loose ends of her new position, and seemed to have everything under control.

"Well, let me know if you have any problems, or need to talk about anything. Of course, half the time, Commander Cain functions as the real Flight Commander of this ship. He still takes patrols occasionally, whenever he can, in fact, and I doubt anything could convince him to leave off flying permanently."

The small shared humour dissolved more of the tension, and Electra was almost completely at her ease. Kleopatra saw her quick eyes settle on a hologram next to her on the desk.

The blonde flushed slightly as she realized her stare had been noticed. "He's a very handsome man. I think I've seen him somewhere before. Isn't he in the Service, on another battlestar?" *I may as well risk asking...*

"Yes. He's Colonel Tigh, from the GALACTICA. Never forget the 'Colonel' part, either."

"You must know him well," Electra commented.

"Quite. He was my husband."

She gasped, certain she'd just put her foot in her mouth and made an enemy of the Colonel with her frank statements. "I'm sorry..."

Kleopatra picked up the holo. *He really was a very attractive man*, she mused. "I'm not sorry. We had a lot of good times together. Duty came between us, and my opportunity here. Too much separation, I guess. I've seen it happen to other military families." She smiled at the image in the hologram, and stroked the smooth crystal as she might stroke the man's cheek.

Electra seemed to feel she was intruding, for she rose smoothly to her feet. "I have to get going, Colonel, and prepare those strike teams. I trust you'll excuse me?"

"Of course; you're free to go," she replied absently. The Major nodded and swiftly left the room.

Kleopatra stared at Tigh's image. All the time they'd spent together, just memories, now. Those memories were precious to her -- but they weren't everything, she realized. The career she'd built over the yahrens was important, too, and had been a part of her life before she knew Tigh, and was still a part of her life now that he was gone. If he couldn't accept that part of her...

Be honest, Klea, she told herself sternly. *It's Cain he has trouble accepting. This may have been coming for a long time, but Cain and the PEGASUS finally blew it open.* She took a deep breath, and found the inner serenity that assured her she'd made the right choice in accepting Cain's offer of the position of Executive Officer. She'd made friends here; she was respected as an officer and as a person. And it looked like she wasn't going to die today, after all.

Unless, of course, she failed to show up on the Bridge to relieve the Commander for his rest period. A last quick look at her cosmetics, and she was ready to leave. She almost placed the hologram in a drawer, then deliberately replaced it on her desk.

"I still love you, Tigh, and I might even miss you, but I'm the one who has to live this life of mine," she told the image firmly. "I'll leave you here as a reminder of the good days. I won't expect anything from you now that you're a free man again, and I hope you'll expect nothing from me. Our sealing is dissolved. Maybe, in the future, we can at least meet as friends, and maybe we'll get to know each other all over again. But for now, I've got a job to do."

The lights went out. The door closed behind her. The small hologram glowed faintly in the dark.

* * * * *

Cain began to realize how long he'd been awake, how long he'd been pushing himself. The fire in his veins was quenched by the weariness that took over now that there was a lull in the battle and they were forced to play a waiting game. His beloved PEGASUS was safe for now, and his plan to keep her that way was nearly ready for action. The VENTURE was almost loaded, and Rurik, Sherlock's man, reported the ship's engineering section was completely rigged and ready for detonation. The man knew

his job; the Commander trusted his ability.

Kleopatra returned from her rest to oversee the final preparations and to stand guard on the Bridge, permitting Cain to take a little time for a meal and a rest period of his own. He grabbed a bite in the pilots' mess first, expecting he'd be too keyed up for any kind of restful sleep. Then he sat down at the desk in his quarters, planning to thoroughly study Captain Veleda's damage reports. A few moments, he thought, then he'd lie down. After all the pacing he'd done in the last day and a half, his body should be too weary to move -- but he still fully expected to wake up sleep-walking, strolling through some part of his ship, still responding physically to his mental exertion.

He overestimated himself. The reports blurred, ceased to make any sense, and he closed his eyes to clear them. The papers were too close to his face; his head rested on his arms. A moment's rest would clear his vision...

Gradually, with a hazy sensation of dreaming, a familiar face and form took shape, running across the room to meet him. It was her apartment, and it was her birthday, and they had a wonderful evening planned, and she was the one to be surprised, not he...

"Cain!" Cassiopeia cried gladly. "I didn't expect you so early!" That was obvious even to an untrained eye. She was more than a little dishevelled; her blonde hair was damp, and she was wearing only a bathing tunic.

Too damned bad he didn't have the time he wanted...

He returned her embrace, gazing into those liquidly expressive blue eyes. "You're even beautiful when you're all wet."

She laughed at him. "Just wait until I'm ready for this evening," she promised provocatively.

He sighed. "That can't be, I'm afraid. Instead of a sector's leave, I've only a few days, and precious little of it free to spend with you. I'm due back on the PEGASUS very soon."

A shadow crossed her face, dimming the brightness of her eyes for a moment. "I'm sure your daughter doesn't share your sentiments. She'll be glad to know you're away from me."

His fingers tightened on her arms. "Come, come, Cassie. Sheba is a grown woman, and I'm a grown man. We're both entitled to our own likes and dislikes -- and our own loves, for that matter."

She looked away. "She doesn't think a socialator is good enough for the great Commander Cain." Bitterness coloured her voice. "After four thousand yahrens, there are still so many prejudices and misconceptions about us, on so many of the Worlds... Why can't we be accepted as any other ordinary human beings?"

Cain lifted her chin, gazing deeply and sincerely into those magnificent sapphire eyes, holding them with his own. "Sheba would feel the President of the Quorum of Twelve wasn't good enough for me. But she's young, and very possessive of her father; I'm all she has. Still, she'll learn. She'll come to like you, and to accept you -- in time."

"And meanwhile?"

"Ah, Cassie..." He touched her trembling lips, holding them captive with his own until the trembling was no longer caused by bitter sadness, but was a-quiver in time with her quickening pulse.

"Unfortunately," he murmured, breaking the breathless embrace, "we don't have the time now, much as I wish I could stay. But I brought you something, my sweet Cassiopeia. Happy birthday!" He produced a small package that held the gems he'd chosen for her.

Her eyes grew wide again as she accepted the gift. "Cain, you didn't have to..." She gasped as she opened the box and saw the exquisitely cut, expensively set gems.

"I know. I wanted to."

"Oh, Cain...!"

"I wish I could stay, Cassie, but I can't; I have to go. I wanted to give you these first." What a picture she was, in her short wrap-tunic, with those tiny, dripping curls falling free of her carefully pinned-up golden hair. She was lovely in every sense of the word. Lords, he wanted to be with her tonight, mind and body!

Her glorious smile faltered. "I know," she whispered. "I'll keep them until next time. I couldn't wear them for anyone else..."

"I'm glad," he managed to respond. "I'll return to you..." He pulled her close again for a last passionate embrace.

"I know..."

* * * * *

"Father?"

Cain woke with a start, his dream -- memory, actually -- fading back into his subconscious. "What?" he demanded commandingly, immediately alert, seeing his daughter standing before his desk. "What is it, Sheba?"

"You said you wanted to see me when our patrol was over. The VENTURE is prepared; we're ready now. Electra has her strike wings in the Ready Room in the landing bay." She looked...not exactly tired, but nervous and unhappy about something.

"Certainly, certainly, I'll be right with you." He picked up his previously discarded jacket.

"We got the saboteur, and a Cylon Raider," she told him, her eyes downcast.

"Good for you. Too bad you couldn't bring him in, though. High Command would've loved interrogating him." He was unexpectedly grim. Sheba glanced at him, but couldn't continue to his face; she lowered her eyes again. "What is it?" he asked more gently. "What's troubling you, baby?"

"You have the report, Commander. We located no Cylons except for the straggler that blasted Tophet, and we got that one... I had him in my sights, Father. I had Tophet in my sights, dead on, and...I couldn't fire at him," she finished in a rush.

He came around the desk, watching her gravely.

She blinked away a tear. "He was...a Warrior... And he was in a Viper. I just couldn't fire at him!"

"I see."

"What's wrong with me, Father? I'm a Warrior. He was our enemy; he tried to kill us all. But I still couldn't fire at him!"

Cain's voice was thoughtful. "The duty tours you've had have been on our defence perimeter. You've only had to fire at Cylons, or occasionally at pirates in alien ships. You've never had to go after another human being before. You've never pulled planet duty, or had to confront a human face-to-face, with life-and-death stakes. You've never been put in that situation before."

"I'm sorry, Father. I...failed you, and all my friends..."

"No, you've not failed me, Sheba."

"It won't happen again, sir," she promised fervently.

"I'm glad it happened. You've just learned something more about being a Warrior, and I'm glad you have the sensitivity to know it. Your mother was like that, so sensitive," he said with a distant, lonely wistfulness. "You're a lot like her that way, with such a sensitive side, a sensitive strength. Don't be afraid of it, child; don't lose it. You're so like your mother..."

She threw herself into her father's arms, needing that shelter. Warriors weren't perfect; sometimes, they had to face their all-too-human fallibility. *They were human.* Sheba felt she'd lost some of her childhood innocence at last.

Cain held her for long moments, remembering the loving, caring, sensitive woman who'd given him this daughter.

But Jerusha wasn't the only sensitive woman in his life. Now, there was Cassiopeia, waiting for him back in the Colonies. He'd promised her a decision when he returned. His decision was made. He needed to feel the loving and caring she would give him if he asked her. He *needed* a woman beside him again...

The daughter in his arms wouldn't accept the answer he wanted from Cassiopeia. How could he explain the needs within him that the other woman could fill, the emptiness she could banish, the sensitive balance the Warrior needed to be whole?

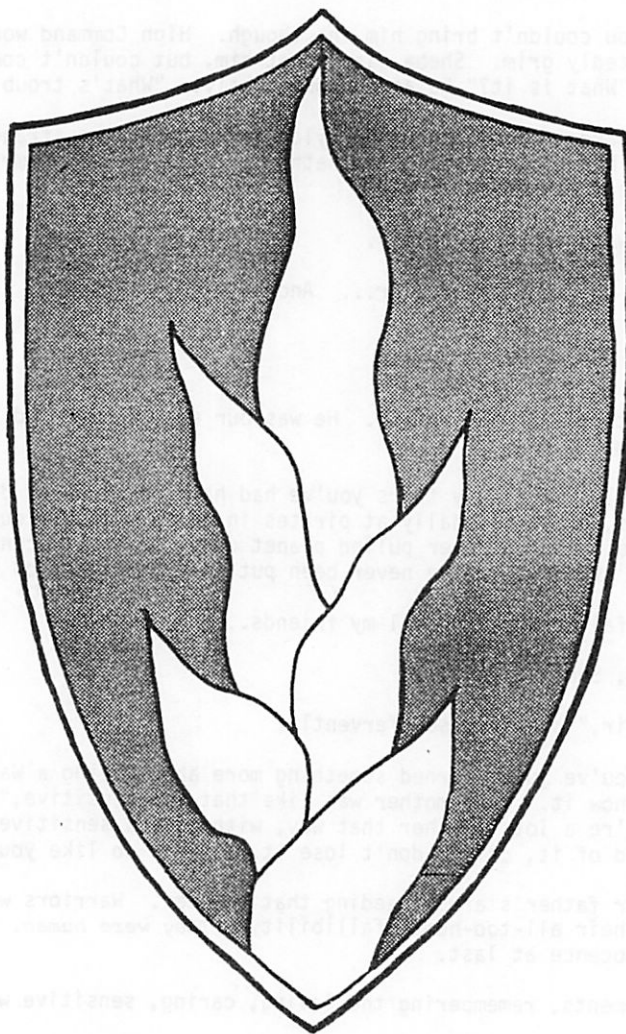
He saw Sheba gaze up at him as if waiting for an answer to some question. "Later," he said aloud, more to himself than to her. He would find a way; there was still time.

She smiled back at him, a wide, sweet, loving smile; she was the image of her mother at times. He was glad he had her with him. To lose his daughter...

"Let's get going. We'll talk later. Right now, we've both got jobs to do, and a 'gift' to give," he said, releasing his hold on her.

"Yes, sir!"

Sheba walked beside her father with pride. Part of her mother, he'd said. *And part of him. I'll never forget that. Like Mother, I belong at his side -- and that's where I'll stay, whatever happens, no matter what...*



XII

A few centars of sleep and a shot of stimulants took the edge off their weariness, but those were no substitute for the complete collapse their rest-starved bodies craved. They were allowed a brief respite while their fellows pulled patrols and helped Damage Control and Engineering. Now, they gathered in the Ready Room, expecting orders to scramble at any micron.

Electra took another look at her volunteers. Amun was playing a solitary card game. Rissian had discovered an old friendship and a common interest with Daystar, and the two men were animatedly discussing baroque musical forms. She was glad Rissian had put aside his rage, if only briefly.

Astarte, Celene, and Celeste were gossiping intermittently. The Major listened for a while, but found herself lost in a welter of names she didn't know, and tuned their conversation out.

Heimdal and Sif were alone in a corner. They were entitled to some measure of solitude; the husband-and-wife team knew the odds were against both of them returning from this mission.

Electra self-consciously forced her gaze away from them. She was still piqued that neither of them showed any sign of strain from the battle -- their uniforms, their faces, their hair -- all were as pristine and perfect as if they'd just stepped off a recruiting poster -- while she herself still smelled of smoke, and her hair was dull with soot. Neither of them looked tired, either.

The winged-sword banner of the PEGASUS caught her eye for a moment, then she determinedly picked up a tape someone had abandoned in that first wild rush, two days before. Wandering to the nearest reader, she dropped it in. Logistics of Scorpion Pre-Imperium Tactical Manoeuvres. Merciful Lords, a military history buff! Ancient military history, at that... But there was nothing else around, and it was something she could easily drop at a micron's notice.

Her mind wandered over the mission ahead as words and diagrams flowed unheeded across the screen of the small tape reader...

It was simple, actually. When the Cylons were spotted next, they would be lured to the VENTURE. That ship, loaded with explosives, strategically not-quite-concealed amidst a cluster of equally deadly tylium asteroids, would certainly draw the enemy near. Cain gambled that the base star itself was now hunting them; the Vipers were to put up just enough defence to lure it into action. How could a Cylon commander resist such tempting bait? It would be logical to expect the PEGASUS to intervene when VENTURE was attacked...

The PEGASUS, however, would be recalling her Warriors and preparing for flight or battle, whichever was necessary.

It was a dangerous mission. Electra's wing would be the last to retreat; they had orders to explode the VENTURE when the base star came within range. They would be the last Warriors to face the might of an entire base star, and they themselves might be caught in the spectacular explosion. At the very least, if the plan worked, they would have to face any surviving Raiders -- who would be hunting vengeance just as the survivors from the OLYMPUS had done.

And if the plan failed, Electra wouldn't be around to learn if Cain succeeded in taking on the Cylons in a final death struggle...

She wished she'd have Orestes to fly with her, but she knew Amun was good; she'd flown with him before. And Astarte seemed competent enough. But they couldn't have the same almost instinctive manoeuvre-for-manoeuve precision she and her brother shared. *Of course, leave it to Orestes to survive the destruction of an entire fleet, then almost get himself killed the moment he took up Supply duty. He certainly knows the best times to be wounded...*

Her heart jumped into her throat as a klaxon sounded its alarm and battle lights flooded the room. She abandoned her tape, grabbed her helmet, took a deep breath, and ran for her Viper. *The final moment of truth...*

* * * * *

The Bridge swarmed with activity. The Commander's eyes were fastened unblinkingly on the scanners

as he concentrated on trying to second-guess his Cylon opponent. Kleopatra paced the Bridge with agitated, rapid steps, glancing occasionally at Cain, but usually studying the consoles and crew members, reassuring herself that everything on the ship was as ready as they could make it, as prepared for battle as possible.

Reports flowed in from several daring pilots cleverly hidden in the asteroid field. Other fighters relayed their information back to the PEGASUS.

"Worse than the damned frakking Void," Cain grumbled under his breath. But the reports told him what he wanted to hear. The Cylons were moving in cautiously, with only a few Raiders scouting ahead of the base star. Perhaps they expected no real trouble, or perhaps the Fifth Fleet had inflicted a truly devastating blow on the opposing force as they themselves were shattered. More likely, the other Raiders were still aboard their huge warship, refueling and rearming for yet another vicious attack.

The lights, damage sirens, and klaxons no longer made any conscious impression, save for unnecessarily grating on ears and nerves. "Sir!" Corporal Memnon shouted over the noise. "Strike wings are away. Lieutenant Sheba's rear guard is in position, and Major Electra's wing has launched for the VENTURE."

The Commander acknowledged the report with a curt nod, then returned to the scanners, staring as though they mesmerized him. "They're making this too damned easy," he muttered uncomfortably.

Kleopatra joined him on the command deck. A glance at Tolan's board, and she turned back to Memnon. "General patrol status?"

"All patrols have reported in and are returning to base as ordered, except for those directly under Captain Tamyris."

She could scarcely hear him above the din. "Any reports of other survivors?"

"Negative, Colonel. There may be a few at the rendezvous point, though, since during the battle we weren't able to pass the word to everybody to link up with us..."

She waved him to silence as Cain's eyes settled on her. "We've got a chance, Colonel," he said, an edge of tension in his voice.

The edge of a blade, sharp and bright and singing for blood... "I'm sure Electra can do the job," she replied. "And the others know their duties." *But will all our little efforts be sufficient? They have to be...*

A solidly-built man with greying brown hair and the beginnings of a paunch joined them. Commander Ismenos of the VENTURE stared at the picture Cain watched while the Colonel continued her restless prowling. His scowl was one of pure hatred.

"You can't fight necessity," Cain remarked, seeing the other man's expression.

"No," the other said flatly. "Sometimes, you can't fight anything in this endless war."

* * * * *

Electra almost jumped out of her skin when two fighters suddenly swept out from hiding and her com screeched into life at the same instant.

"The Cylons are closing, Major," a weary soprano announced. That would be Captain Tamyris. "Approximately twenty ships in the vanguard. No others appear to be launching at this time."

Twenty ships... We can handle that many, but if any more launch...

The patrol leader had the same idea. "Do you want us to stick with you for back-up?"

"How're your fuel reserves?"

There was a moment's silence before Tamyris replied. "Low, but if you need help..."

"Go home, Captain. If this doesn't work, the PEGASUS will need you more than we will. I'm sure Sheba's squadron can give us all the help we need. You've had a long day -- go home."

The woman sighed, more with relief than with reluctance. "Very well, Major. We're on our way."

There was a murmured, "Good luck!" as two Vipers vanished into the debris-strewn star field.

Electra checked her scanners again. "Anybody got a position check on Lieutenant Sheba?"

"They're ready," Daystar reported from her right flank. "In position, and tracking Cylons." She waited impatiently as a burst of static assaulted her ears, interrupting him; then he spoke again. "They'll take the first wave, Major, draw the Cylons closer while we get set."

"We're about as set as we'll ever be," she muttered to herself. "Amun? Astarte?"

"Here. Give the word." It was Amun's steady, reassuring voice.

"All ready! Let's take them!" That was the Cadet's -- no, the *Sergeant's* -- naive confidence.

"Just don't blow anything before it's time," she reminded them. "We'll be in the middle of it."

"Look out, woman!" a male voice bellowed from *somewhere*.

Electra hastily checked her scanners again before peering into the darkness around her.

"I don't see anything..."

"What is it...?"

The Major's voice cut across those of her confused wingmates. "There's nothing here. Who yelled? What do you see?" *Who gave that warning? It doesn't seem meant for us...*

Then a Cylon Raider appeared, dodging from behind an asteroid, seemingly almost close enough to touch. There was a second ship immediately behind it...

Another ambush...!

* * * * *

"Patrols report they are engaging Cylons," Tolan said, his voice much calmer than he actually felt. His hands were cold, and his heart seemed ready to burst in his chest. "Lieutenant Sheba's wing is making a strategic retreat, as planned, and the Cylons are following, as expected. One casualty so far..."

Cain peered over the younger man's shoulder, as he'd done throughout the eternity of the past two days, his eyes narrowed as he studied the confusing formations the scan turrets provided; additional information was relayed through VENTURE's still-functional instruments. He made out several Vipers and Raiders in the dangerous melee, but each of the "friendlies" was identified as part of Sheba's defensive squadron; none were from Electra's cadre, whose responsibility it was to explode the VENTURE -- even if it cost them their lives to do so.

"Where in Hades is that Major?" he growled at the mute screen.

Tolan cringed at the ire in his voice. "They don't appear to be in position yet," he faltered.

"They damned well better get there!" he shot back. "Sheba's retreating, leaving an open path to VENTURE. Where's Electra? She's my trigger. The Cylons will suspect..." *I need your edge, Major...*

"Sir!"

"What is it, Kleopatra?" He listened half-consciously, the rest of his mind bent to willing more blips to appear on the screen, the tiny symbols of his Flight Commander's progress.

Colonel Kleopatra stood beside Memnon, the Communications technician on duty -- *still?* "They were attacked, sir. Apparently, the Cylons had a trick or two of their own waiting for us. Two damaged Vipers, personnel uninjured; they're returning to base, hoping to hook up with Sheba. The others are moving into position..."

He nodded. "I see them," he said succinctly, watching as seven small moving lights answered his mental summons and traced a slow path across the screen.

"They're almost in range, Electra," he whispered tensely. "*Blow it!*" Then the Commander of the PEGASUS took a deep breath, leaned back, and stretched. He picked up his riding crop, which had

lain on the console unnoticed for nearly a centar, and slapped it against his palm, watching the screen with concentrated intensity, a half-smile on his lips. *She's in position. We have them now...*

* * * * *

"Are they ignoring us completely?" Rissian demanded in outrage. "Why aren't they pursuing us? Cylons don't act like this!"

"They're just being careful," Electra replied evenly. The Cylons were closing on the VENTURE, true, but more slowly than hoped for -- cautiously, keeping well clear of several vitally-located asteroids as they approached their prey. Raiders were moving into flanking positions around her squadron; her scanners, amplified by the cruiser's more powerful instruments, showed them clearly. They were being forced back against their own bomb, into their own trap...

Well, if that's the price...

"Major, we're getting awfully close..." Astarte began nervously.

I wonder... Will the Cylons follow if we suddenly appear to lose our nerve? Do they suspect a trap here? We have to lure them closer. Getting killed this far from VENTURE will serve no purpose...

"Squadron, get ready. At my signal, skim through the immediate explosion zone, past the VENTURE..."

"What?" she heard from several sputtering voices at once. She understood their outraged reaction. Being involved in this aspect of the trap's success was bad enough -- but were they required to commit suicide for it?

"Past the VENTURE," she repeated. "Hopefully, when they see us turn tail, they'll swarm after us. And hopefully, we'll be through and away before the real fireworks start. If not, at least we'll be doing some good..."

"They'll really think *that's* a trap!" somebody muttered.

"But they should decide to grab the VENTURE while they can, even if they let us go. Now, on my mark..."

One Raider chanced a shot. It missed an asteroid by metres, a ship by perhaps twice that much...

Electra could feel herself sweat...

"Go -- *now!*"

Seven Colonial Vipers hit maximum thrust, retreating from their enemies, closing on what the Cylons could only assume was their base ship -- perhaps to hide under its guns? Not a good choice -- the cruiser was only minimally armed, and would stand no chance against any kind of determined attack, even on her best day...

A squadron of Raiders raced right behind them.

"*Donner!* My engine's sputtering, Heimdal. I don't think..."

"I'll stay with you, Sif. We'll make it. It can't be time for our Choosing yet."

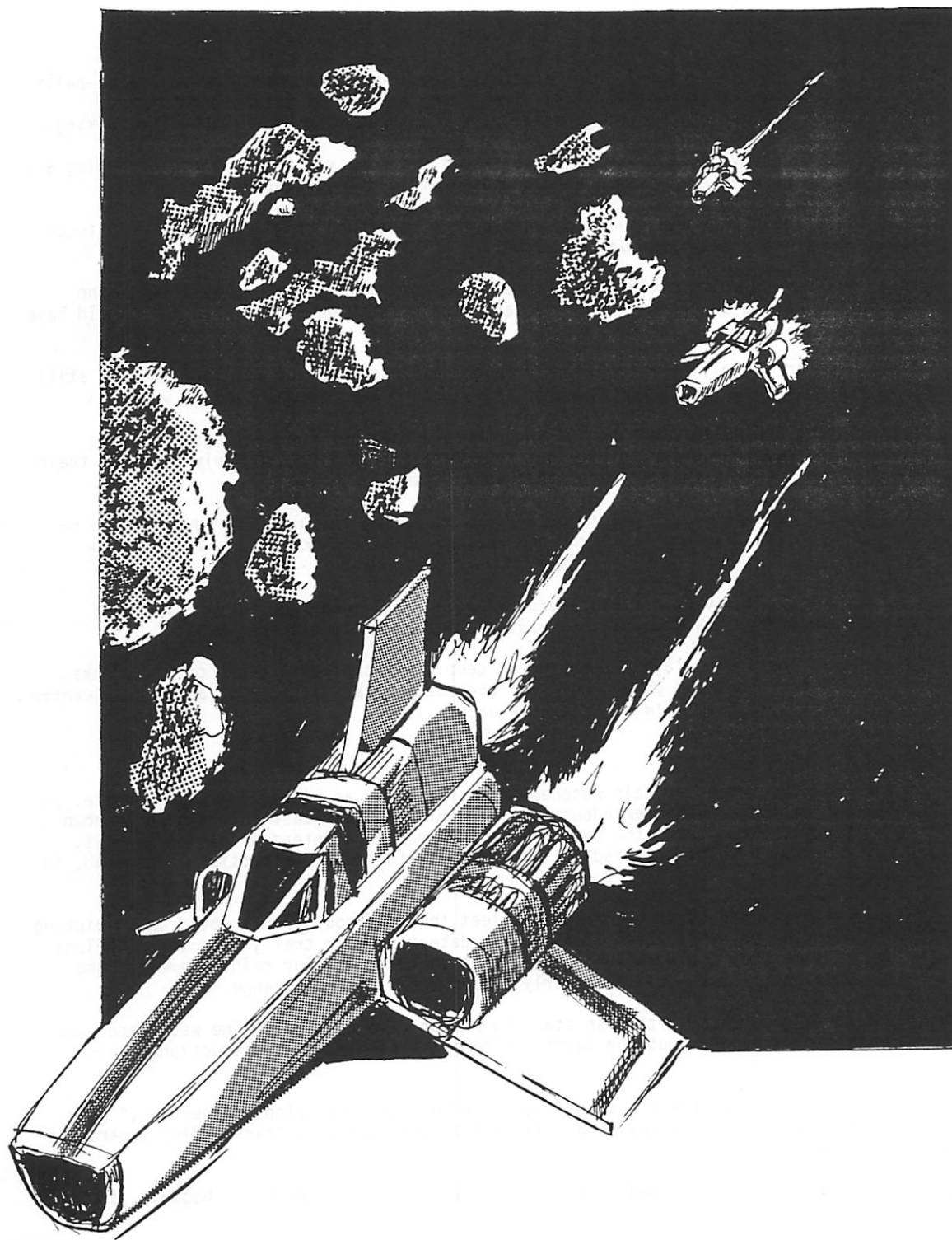
Sif's wounded fighter dropped slowly behind, and Captain Heimdal slowed his own ship to stay close to his wife. She'd refused to leave earlier, when her Viper was first damaged, insisting she was all right and would remain with the squadron, although Celeste and Amun had returned to the PEGASUS. Her choice may have been a bad one.

The VENTURE slipped past, a blur of metal...

Electra's throat was dry. She couldn't risk everything for two pilots... "Daystar, get ready. On my signal, hit braking thrusters. Then fire, and move again. Goose that throttle like it's never been goosed before. We'll make it, that way..."

"Now, *brake!*"

The two ships seemed to stall into doomed immobility, still within the maze of asteroids and hidden bombs. *We'll have to move fast...*



She waited, delaying her next order for a long micron, watching intently, her breath frozen within. Her heart beat once... Twice... Another beat...

"Thank you, Major," she heard Heimdal say as two Vipers swept past her. They were almost safe now...

Heimdal's voice was slow. Everything was slow...

"Fire!"

The two Warriors fired as one, their small ships instantly leaping forward into the very fire-balls they'd created. Somewhere behind them, the Cylons fired, too; a lance of laser fire hit near Electra, and she realized the explosions were spreading, a chain reaction. Her Viper was shaking...

Then something happened to the VENTURE. The universe itself became a veritable Hades, exploding all around her, impossible to escape -- a living being composed of wildfire, reaching for her...

Then the world was black again, her eyes blinded, unable to accept such brilliance, the very touch of star-fire itself... *Is this all there is to death...?*

"Wow!" she heard an awe-struck voice exclaim from somewhere seemingly very far away. "Even the BRITANNICA didn't make that big an explosion..." Astarte again, staying behind when she should have been moving...

"Sergeant..." Electra began sternly, then could only laugh helplessly as she realized she was still alive, free of the explosion area, with her squadron still around her. *Whole, alive, well...*

A wild whoop of excitement and relief from one of the others echoed her own feelings. The day wasn't over; clean-up and repair had far to go. But they were still alive, and only a few of their Cylon pursuers could have survived that inferno, that apocalypse...

Cain's inferno... Cain's apocalypse... Cain's hell-fire, cleansing the stars... His tribute to and vengeance for all who died, victory torn from the very grasp of the murderous, treacherous foe...

It's so poetic, so prophetic, something of the stuff of legends and mythology, a revelation of death... Maybe it's a page from the Book of the Word of the Lords. It has that feel...

But she was still alive. She laughed again, gasping in deep breaths of air, tears on her cheeks. *I'll have to get to know that handsome young med tech, the one who kept staring at me in Life Centre the last time. I can visit Orestes; it's a believable excuse...*

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On the Bridge of the PEGASUS, Commander Cain watched in satisfaction as his tylium-and-solenite, asteroid-and-starship trap exploded with tremendous fury, claiming a Cylon base star and an unknown number of Raiders. The Cylons had taken the bait, believing what he'd intended them to believe, that the VENTURE was a betrayed ship; they had followed Electra to their destruction. They had, in fact, destroyed themselves.

And now, the PEGASUS, with all the survivors from the Fleet that she could find, moved away, picking up her scattered children as she went. Even if the enemy detected their trail, even if the Cylons knew their path, by the time they could rally any surviving forces, call for reinforcements, and prepare to re-engage, the battlestar would be utterly beyond their tracking range.

"I hope my ship died for a good cause," the man standing beside Cain growled. "She was a good one." Commander Ismenos was still unhappy about the sacrifice demanded of him, the destruction of his ship.

"She was too badly damaged to keep up with us in flight, or to avoid the Cylons on her own," Cain reminded him. "You saved your crew's lives, what few of them were left, by transferring aboard the PEGASUS and letting us use her as a lure."

"One solium-stuffed decoy," the man replied sourly. "What a way to end a career. Goodbye, star lady..."

Cain strode down from the command deck. Sheba stood there, waiting for him; she had returned from guard duty in time for those last tense centons, as he waited, as he saw his attack plan carried through.

"Well, Lieutenant, what now?" he asked her jovially, his normal good spirits returned.

"Back to the Colonies?" she ventured. She was proud -- very proud -- at that moment, despite her weariness. Her father had saved what was left of the Fifth Fleet, and had tricked the Cylons, as he always did. They were alive, and he was "The Commander," and she was his daughter and a loyal Warrior. She gloried in being with him at his moment of triumph. The Cylon trap hadn't claimed all its intended victims -- and she and her father would return to make them pay for what they'd taken.

Cain's face betrayed his concentration; his eyes narrowed as he stared at his daughter, his riding crop slapping rhythmically against one palm as he swung it with the other hand. "No," he said slowly. "I think not. If they do figure out that we survived, which I expect them to do -- they're not complete imbeciles, after all -- they'll be waiting for us. There'll be Cylons lined up from here to the Colonies, all waiting for us, all waiting to take free shots at the PEGASUS.

"No, we're going to surprise them..."

He turned to face his second-in-command. "Colonel, the Hsarri, Brimartis -- she said there were Cylons in the Empire. I wonder where the Delphians went. The Cylons trapped us, and they've already taken Molukai, but what about the Empire? Where are the Delphian starships, their warriors?

"I know those people; they don't go down easily. We all know how they've always wanted Molukai -- why weren't they there? I want to know what happened in the Delphian Empire."

Every eye on the Bridge was on him as he turned back to Sheba. "We're not going back to the Colonies, not just yet. I think we're going to take a roundabout way. We're going to visit Gamoray, the Delphian capital, and find out just what in Hades is going on in this part of space. We're going to find out where our so-called Intelligence went wrong, why no one predicted this.

"And while we're at it, we're going to see how much of a thorn we can be in the Imperious Leader's side. The Fifth Fleet may be gone, but the Cylons still have to deal with us. And we're going to keep reminding them what a Colonial Warrior is, and what he does, and how he fights."

He glanced at his Bridge crew. "Are you with me?"

A rousing cheer rose from the throats of the assembled personnel, and they raised their fists as if to strike the Cylons then and there.

"We may have lost a battle, but we haven't lost the war. As long as we live, *we haven't lost the war!*"

The cheer was repeated, echoing madly in its mighty, giddy roar. Cain turned back to his daughter once again. "We'll get home eventually, but first, we'll find out what happened at Molukai, and why. And we'll start at Gamoray."

Sheba was exultant. The Fifth Fleet might be gone, but she was with her father, and they would be together for a long time, through all the battles to come, and the journey to Gamoray.

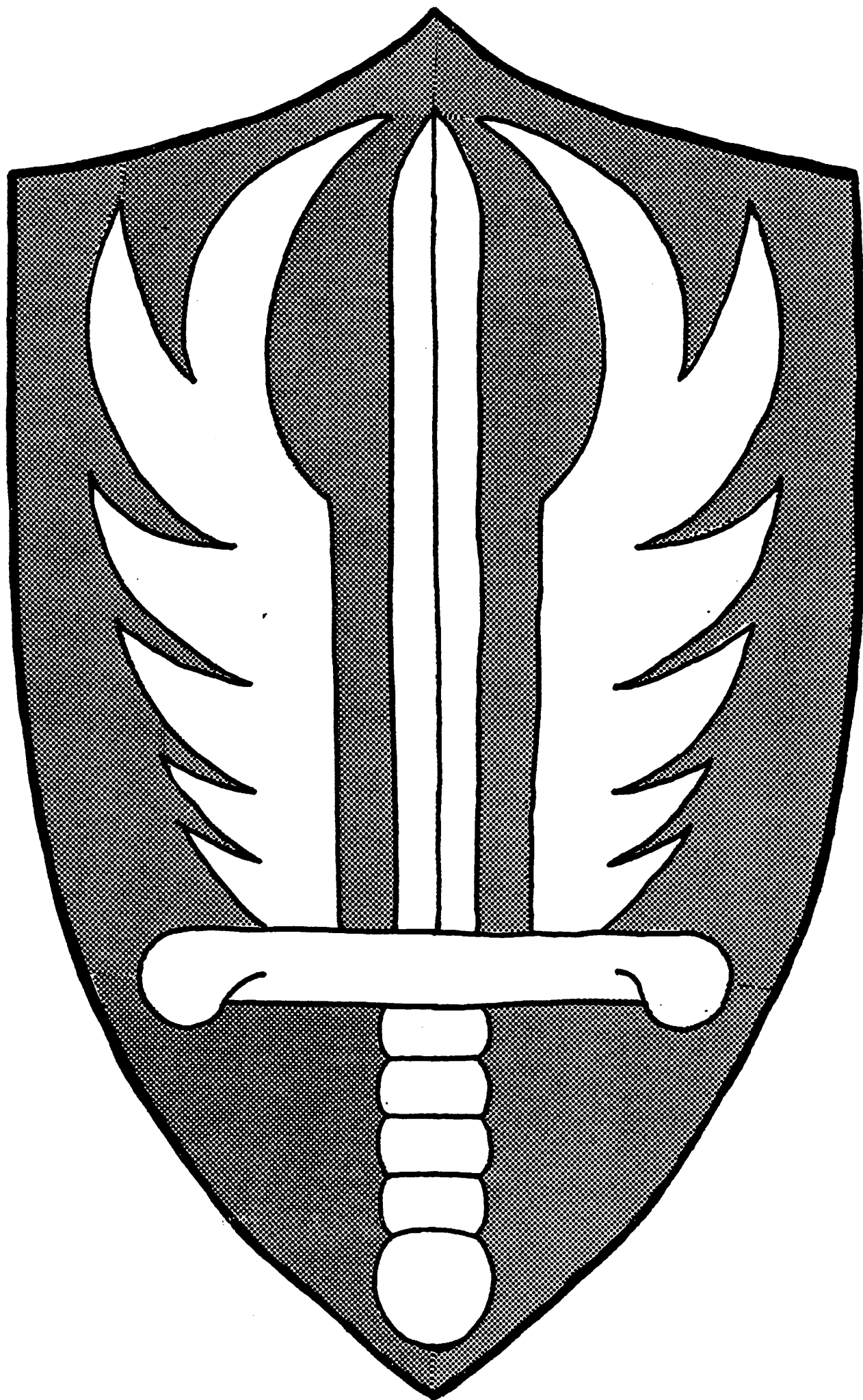
And when we return to the Colonies in glory -- her heart gave an involuntary leap of joy -- perhaps even Cassiopeia will be gone from his heart and thoughts forever! She smiled brightly, nodding fervently in response to her father's searching gaze.

"Good!" he said brusquely. Then he again addressed the watching Bridge crew. "Continue your duties. Helm, head for the rendezvous point to look for more survivors. Colonel, I want to know immediately if anything turns up. And order a general meeting of all department heads as soon as it can be arranged. In the meantime, I'm going to visit the fighter bays and Life Centre. I've got some new personnel to welcome aboard!"

He strode briskly toward the turbolift, his daughter following self-importantly at his heels.

The Cylons and the Colonies had not heard the last of the "living legend."

Cain would return!



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